TEN COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

FAMOUS WESTERN

DOUBLE ACTION MAGAZINE

NOV.

15¢

WHEN BEEF IS BOUGHT BY BULLETS
By Lee Floren

•

MAKE WAY FOR A BUCKAROO
By Wayne D. Overholser

•

SWAN SONG FOR SIXGUNS
By Robert Turner

This is the first of a series of announcements which will appear in leading newspapers from Coast to Coast

THE POWER OF GOD FOR YOU

While Atomic Scientists and Researchers were delving into the secret of the atom, and the energy it contains, Spiritual Researchers and pioneers were delving into the Realm of God. The Atomic Scientists came up with the secret of atomic fission, something so horrible that, uncontrolled, it can wipe civilization off the face of the earth.

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Speaking only of our own researches into the invisible Realm of God, we are in a position to state with reasonable certainty that through the existing Power of The Spirit of God the human race now may be completely revolutionized, and the nations can live in peace, one with the other. An application of this newly-discovered Spiritual Power can heal all diseases—NOW. When followed to its logical culmination, it can and will eliminate the phenomenon of death. This was promised by Jesus.

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Now that we are sure of our ground, we invite all Americans, of all faiths, and those of no faith at all, to make inquiry of us. We shall be extremely happy to pass on to others what we have discovered about God. This revelation, or discovery, comes to the earth just in the nick of time. Had it not been made, this civilization might have destroyed itself. With this knowledge, however, it is now possible for all men and women, and all nations, to enjoy to the full all the Power there is in the Realm of God, and enjoy it—NOW.

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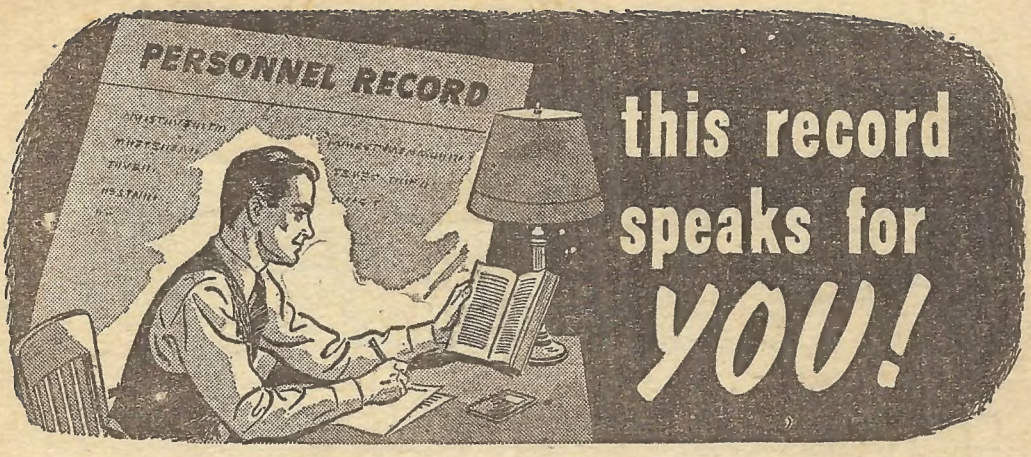
Address

THE PSYCHIANA RELIGION*

DEPT., 31, MOSCOW, IDAHO, U.S.A.

* An international non-profit religious organization of 20 years standing whose operations are by mail exclusively. See "INSIDE THE U. S. A." by John Gunther. See also "THEY HAVE FOUND A FAITH" by Dr. Marcus Bach, Professor in the Dept. of Religion, Iowa State University—a BOBBS-MERRILL release.



this record speaks for YOU!

Most men are promoted on the strength of their records. Performance and training reports rank high in determining how fast and how far employees will advance. But, unless it shows up on the record—unless it is seen by the right men—ability may go unnoticed and unrewarded.

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10 Complete Western Stories

FAMOUS WESTERN

Volume 8 **November, 1947** **Number 6**

THREE GUNSWIFT NOVELETS

MAKE WAY FOR A BUCKAROO **..By W. D. Overholser** **10**
Bill Yale wanted to give the other man an even break, but . . .

SWANSONG FOR SIXGUNS **.....By Robert Turner** **24**
Ed Mannix had to side his father's murderer to save a friend!

WHEN BEEF IS BOUGHT BY BULLETS **..By Lee Floren** **64**
— then someone is going to be paid off in blood!

SHORT STORIES

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And there's both the two-footed and the four-footed kind of deer!

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When a fool rushes in to kill, he pays a double penalty!

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The miners were rough men, but they wouldn't stand for city-slicker tricks!

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— to make sure that he won't be framed a second time!

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It was just an old harmonica but it played a big tune for a lonesome kid.

WILD WEST QUIZ **.....By Idaho Bill** **63**
How well do you know the expressions used in the Old West?

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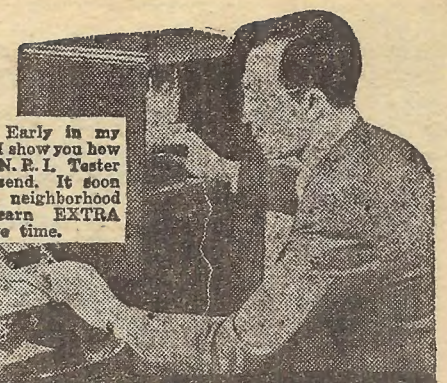
True stories of the bringing of order to the wild west!

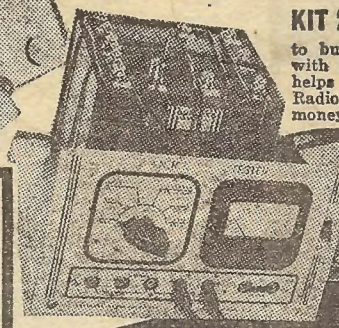
ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

FAMOUS WESTERN published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass. Single Copy 15c. yearly subscription 90c. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope to insure return if not accepted, and while reasonable care will be exercised in handling them they are submitted at author's risk. Printed in U. S. A.

KIT 1 (left) I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio Soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



KIT 2 (left) Early in my course I show you how to build this N. R. I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



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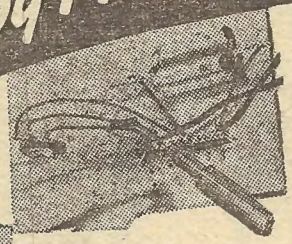
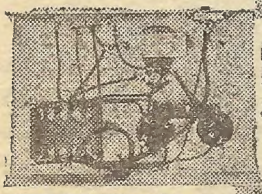
Learn by PRACTICING in Spare Time

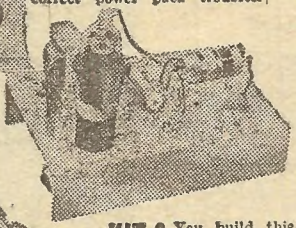
with BIG KITS of RADIO PARTS I send you



KIT 3 You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



KIT 5 Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.

KIT 6 You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

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I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new beautiful suit of muscle!

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says Mrs. Phyllis B. Jones, Blanding, Utah.

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YES, everyone is surprised to find how easy it is to learn music this sound, practical U.S. School way. And once you get started on this amazing home-study course you'll find it a great pastime, real fun, too. For this modern method does away with tiresome scales and exercises, . . ends the need of a private teacher. . . and cuts the time and cost of learning to the bone.

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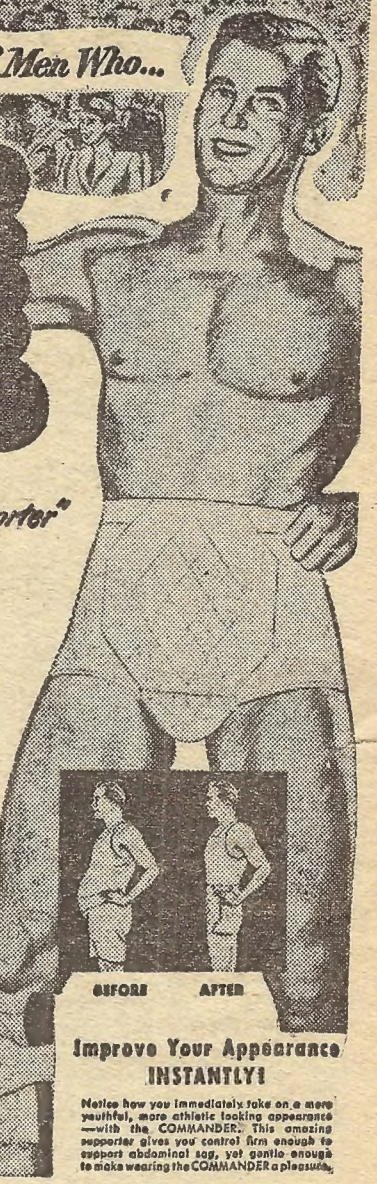

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YES, INSTANTLY, you, too, can begin to feel ALIVE . . . ON TOP OF THE WORLD by joining the Parade of Men who are marching up the highway of happier living with the COMMANDER, the amazing new Men's Abdominal Supporter. Look and feel younger!

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The COMMANDER presents the new exclusively designed "INTERLOCKING HANDS" principle for extra support where you need it most. It flattens the burdensome sagging "corporation" and restores to the body the zestful invigorating feeling that comes with firm, sure "bay window" control. Try COMMANDER yourself.

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"MAKE THIS TEST YOURSELF"

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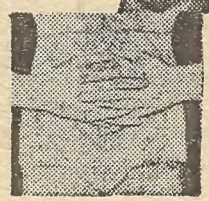

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Notice how you immediately take on a more youthful, more athletic looking appearance—with the COMMANDER. This amazing supporter gives you control firm enough to support abdominal sag, yet gentle enough to make wearing the COMMANDER a pleasure.

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Address.....

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in case of

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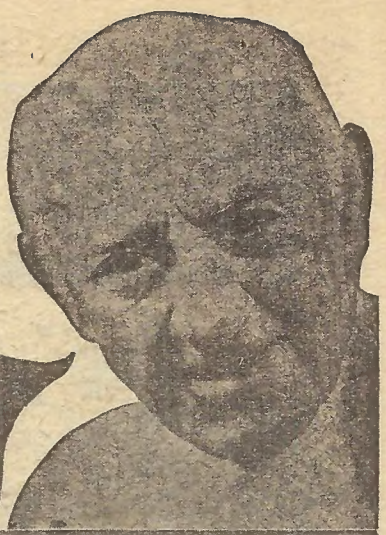

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You are not required to take a medical examination to get North American Hospitalization Protection. Already over 20 million persons in America have enrolled for this valuable kind of coverage . . . proving the practical common sense of protecting your savings from the onslaught of unexpected Hospital and Doctor bills. Send off at once for all the details about this Plan. No obligation. No Agent will call.

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Sally covered the two with a shotgun.

"Bill, when your father came here there was a question about who owned the land. Some was marked swamp land and some was open for entry. Did he wait until Washington told him which was what? . . . The only difference with these folks, Bill, is that they came here twenty years later; if you weren't so mule-headed, you would see their side!"

A BUCKAROO

by Wayne D. Overholser

(Author of "Gunman's Sleep" etc.)

Complete Novelet

1

FUNNY HOW the whole world can go sour on a man in about ten seconds. When Bill Yale stepped into the Silver Dollar, everything looked rosy from the top of the sky right down to the sagebrush that crowded Lake City.

For one thing Bill's Y Star was the biggest spread in the country and he didn't have a thing to worry about worse than taxes. In the second place he loved Sally Miles. There were a few problems in that direction such as getting away from

the herd she ran in the hills back of her father's North Lake store. Wangling an admission from her that she loved him was another. Problems, sure, but nothing a good man couldn't handle, given time and a few moonlit nights.

"Gonna be a big shindig here Saturday night," Bill said expansively.

"Big dance," the barman agreed, and cleared his throat. "Bill, I ain't one to question the workings of Providence, but this business of the sand reef going out strikes me as being too good."

"Things like that happen when a man lives right and works hard," Bill said. "I'll have five thousand acres of hay land when I get it drained and the tules cleared off. Now about this dance. I hear..."

"Bill, are any of your boys in town?"

"No. Why?"

"You're in a tight. That's why. Lang Varling and Thad Hudson have been hanging around town for a couple of days."

Bill laughed. "When did those two yahoos ever get me into a tight? Now will you listen while I talk about this dance?"

"No. You're in a hell of a tight, and you'd know it if you'd stop talking long enough to think. Rowdy Quinn rode in from the west this morning. All three of 'em done a little drinking while ago and a lot of talking. I couldn't hear all of it, but I got enough to know it was about you and that lake bottom." The barman began wiping the mahogany industriously. "Here's your trouble, Bill," he breathed.

That was when the world turned sour. Lang Varling had come in. There was something about Varling made Bill sick whenever he saw the man. Probably it was his business: Varling was a locator who kept trying to settle homesteaders on Y Star range until Bill promised him a gun whipping if the locator showed up on Y star range again.

"Funny stink in here," Bill observed. "You oughtta set a skunk trap, Lard."

Varling sidled up to the bar, green eyes filled with malicious triumph. "I've got my eyes on a section of land along the Rainbow that's open for entry, Yale. Are you going to get tough if I take some settlers down there?"

"Oh, it's you, Varling." Bill turned back to the barman. "Never mind the skunk trap, Lard. You wouldn't have one big enough to hold this varmint."

But the locator was not to be baited. "I asked if you'd object..."

"You're damned right I'll object. I'll shoot your head off, Varling."

LANG VARLING was the thinnest, boniest man Bill had ever seen. His skin was a sickly gray color that always gave Bill the feeling he was talking to a corpse when circumstances forced him into conversation with the locator.

"You've been pretty tough," Varling said, hate whetting an edge to his voice, "but you can't keep settlers off government land. I'm about ready to square things with you."

Bill cuffed back his Stetson, steel-gray eyes narrowing. He was a tall man, this Bill Yale, a man to watch in any kind of a contest. There was a scattering of freckles over his stubby nose and cheeks, and usually he smiled easily, but now there was no hint of a smile lingering in the corners of his mouth.

"All right, Varling," Bill said flatly, gripping Varling's arm. "Let's get this into the open. How are you going to square things?"

"Let me alone," Varling squalled.

That was when Thad Hudson and Rowdy Quinn came in. It was a rigged play. Bill saw that the minute the batwings opened. Hudson was a sort of bodyguard for Varling, a fish-eyed killer who packed his Colt in the manner of a professional gunslinger. Quinn had never been associated with Varling as far as Bill knew. He was a big man, loud of mouth, with a sly smile and an evil reputation around Lake City as a barroom fighter.

"Let him alone, Yale," Hudson snarled. He was crouching, hand splayed over gun butt. "You may be

as big as hell on this range, but being big don't give you no right to kick folks around."

The barman had called the turn. Three to one made it a tight any way you figured. Varling had stepped back, right hand close to his coat lapel. He carried a gun in his shoulder holster, and according to the talk around Lake City, he was faster on the draw than Hudson.

Bill never sought a fight, but, on the other hand, he never ducked one. Now he said casually, "Looks like all the scum in town is in here." He grinned at the barkeep. "What have you got that attracts coyotes, Lard?"

Quinn had edged along the bar until he was within a pace of Bill. Now he tugged a large silver watch from his flowered vest, a sly smile on his thick lips. He slid the watch back, an din a voice unusually soft for him, said, "It's time, Lang."

"Time for what?" Varling asked.

"Time to shut his mouth," Quinn snarled, and came at Bill, great fists swinging.

It didn't make sense, Quinn picking a fight for no reason at all, but Bill didn't have time to think about it. He ducked, sidestepped, rolled his head with the big man's punches, and kept out of Quinn's way. He had nothing against Quinn. As far as he was concerned, the fellow was a mass of blubber and mouth, and he didn't think Quinn had anything against him.

Then one of Quinn's big fists connected. Bill's head felt as if the left side had been sheared off, and he was on his back on the floor. Quinn swung a huge foot at his ribs in a vicious attempt to smash him. He missed. Bill rolled over, and came to his feet like a cat. This time he waded in. He had plenty of reason to fight now.

Bill was on Quinn before the big man regained his balance, swinging rights and lefts that drove Quinn back on his heels. He sank a fist into Quinn's belly that brought a long-drawn "Ahhhhh," from him. The big man lowered his hands, and Bill slugged him on the face. He closed an eye, brought a flow of blood from his mouth, and punched him in the stomach again.

"What the hell's the matter with you," Varling raged. "You aren't earning your money that way."

BILL HEARD what Varling said. A red haze of anger washed through him. He met Quinn's rush with an impact that jarred the glasses on the bar. He took a blow high on his shoulder, another in his ribs. They hurt him, but they didn't stop him. He slugged Quinn on the jaw with a savagely driven fist that brought a glazed look into the big man's eyes.

Quinn was backed against the bar now and couldn't get away. Bill cracked him on the side of the head, and ended the fight with another cruel right connecting squarely with the point of Quinn's jaw. The man fell sideways and lay motionless, utterly limp.

Bill's gun was in his hand when he swung to face Lang Varling. "Why did you sick that plug-ugly onto me? Talk fast 'cause I don't feel like listening long."

Varling stared at Quinn's still form. Then he raised his eyes to Bill. "You said you'd gunwhip me, Yale. A man doesn't forget that right away."

"I wish to hell I had gunwhipped you," Bill rasped. "Now get that carrion out of here and ride, or I'll start my gun talking."

Hudson and Varling carried Quinn out of the saloon, sloshed water over his battered face and helped him into the saddle. A moment later the three of them rode out of town.

"That didn't come out the way Varling figgered," the barman murmured. "I'm guessing they aimed to cool you off permanent."

"Yeah." Bill rubbed his skinned knuckles, eyes speculatively on the barkeep. "Lard, how come they didn't plug me while I was busy with Quinn?"

The apron stooped and lifted a shotgun to the mahogany. "Buckshot makes a corpse plumb messy for burying. Reckon them two wanted to be purtied up by the undertaker."

"Thanks, Lard," Bill said soberly. "You know, it wasn't like Varling to start this rumpus just because I told him I'd lay a gun barrel across his head."

"I told you I heard some talk about the lake bottom. Mebbe he's figuring on locating some nesters on it."

"The damned thieving skunk." Bill pounded a fist on the bar top. "I'll bet that's it."

Bill Yale had assumed, as everybody around Lake City had assumed, that the lake bottom land would belong to Y Star. Now that he thought about it, he wasn't sure.

"There's a nice chunk of money in it for Varling," the barman said.

Bill laid a coin on the bar. "I'm gonna see a lawyer."

THE LAWYER had done work for both Y Star and Varling, and should, Bill thought, give an impartial opinion. He listened gravely, and when Bill explained the situation, he made a steeple of his fingers. "Ever hear of asserting claim as riparian owner?"

"No. Sounds like law doggerel to me."

"It's an old principle of common law that the property of anyone residing along the shore of a body of water is not grounded by surveyed lines along the shore, but goes to the water's edge. Now, since you own all the land along the old east and north shore of the lake, it strikes me you could make a mighty good court fight for the land that is now exposed. Keep in mind, however, that I'm not the one who decides things like that."

"Thanks," Bill said. "That's all I was after."

Riding back to Y Star that night, Bill thought about Lang Varling and the gun trap he'd rigged in the Silver Dollar. Varling had meant to kill him, but why? There was only one possible answer. The locator, as the barman had suggested, aimed to settle nesters on the bottom land. With Bill Yale dead and no one looking after Y Star's interest, Varling could carry out his project without interferenee.

Bill did more thinking that night than sleeping. Chances are Varling had a group of settlers ready to move in. If he did, he'd go ahead, even though his gun trap had failed. Bill's job, then, was to start draining and clearing at once. The trouble was he didn't have the men.

A few nesters lived on Y Star range, families that settled there before Bill had expanded his holdings, and he'd always got along with them. Haying would begin in a few days, but he might get some of them to start ditching the new land. It wouldn't take much work to establish in court that Y Star had taken possession, whatever help that might be.

But Bill didn't contact any of the nesters the next day. He was saddling up when a buckaroo rode a lathered horse into the ranchyard. He yelled, "Bill, there's hell to pay. I just spotted a granger outfit rolling toward North Lake. A regular damned army."

Then Varling had been ready to move. There was no time now to get a ditch crew. If this nesters' outfit settled on the lake land, it might be impossible to get them off.

"I'll go see," Bill said, and swung aboard.

"I'll go with you," the rider said. "We can pick up the boys on the other side of Buck Butte. All we've got to do to change them sodbusters' minds is to show 'em the talking end of a .45."

"No, I'll go alone. I don't want to start a fight." And Bill Yale headed for North Lake alone, knowing he had to do something, but not knowing what

2

THERE WAS a deep and pressing anger in Bill Yale when he reined up in front of Jarvis Miles' store and dismounted. He still didn't know what he was going to do. If the settlers were reasonable, they'd wait until they could get a definite decision on the land. If they weren't, there'd be trouble, and it

wasn't likely they'd show any reason at all with Lang Varling leading them.

Bill walked to the store porch, the black mucky earth gripping his boot heels tenaciously. It was always that way along the lake, even when it hadn't rained for a month and the Eastern Oregon sky was a blue vault unstained by a single cloud.

Jarvis Miles stood in the doorway watching Bill clean his boots on the sack he kept on the front porch.

"What's the matter, Bill?" Miles asked. "You look plumb proddy."

"I get proddy every time I wade that muck. I'm a mind to start buying my stuff in Lake City."

"I got the back graveled," Miles said defensively.

"I don't like coming in the back door." Bill handed a slip of paper to the storekeeper. "Got all that?"

"Hmmmm." Miles' eyes ran down the list until it came to the .45 shells. "What do you want shells for?"

"Not that it's any of your business," Bill snapped.

"Not a damned bit," Miles agreed amiably.

"We may need some lead to throw at a nester outfit that's headed this way."

Miles scratched his bald spot. "Son, the way you're feeling now, you'll need more cartridges than I've got. There's ways of handling nesters that'll make trouble sure. Then there's other ways that won't."

"I never look for trouble with nesters, Jarvis," Bill said sharply. "I've got along with the ones on my range. I send 'em a hunk of beef when I butcher, and there's been mighty little slow elk they've et."

"Then what's got you worked up this time?"

"This is a big outfit. Where'd you figger they'd settle?"

Miles acted as if he hadn't heard. He studied the paper. "Did you ride over to give me this?"

"No. I came over to see what the nesters are up to." He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a nearly empty tobacco sack. "Damn it, Jarvis, that ain't gonna keep me smoking long. Sally inside?"

Miles nodded. "Maybe you rode over to see Sally?"

"Might be."

Miles stepped close to Bill, eyes narrowed by worry. "You and me may be on different sides before this is over. If that happens, don't do anything to hurt Sally."

"What kind of talk is that?"

"I can guess where this bunch is figgering on settling same as you. Maybe they're right."

"The hell they...." Bill began. He stopped, his face, stone-sober. "Jarvis, you were Dad's best friend when he started the Y Star. We'd have et jackrabbit and beef and nothing else if it hadn't been for you. I won't forget that and I won't forget you're Sally's father, but I ain't standing still and letting them nesters steal five thousand acres."

"Your dad had Piutes to fight when he started Y Star, Bill," Miles said softly. "Maybe some rustlers. Times are different now."

"What're you getting at, Jarvis?"

MILES pointed south to where the bridge spanned Link Creek that emptied into South Lake. "They're coming now, son. I'm asking one thing. Hold onto your temper. Once you bust your first cap, there'll be hell to pay."

Bill stared at the long line of covered wagons bobbing around on the rutted road like awkward ships riding a rough sea. "An army of 'em, Jarvis. I'm thinking Lang Varling and Thad Hudson are with 'em. In that case, you still want to keep me from busting a cap?"

"Yes. We know what Varling is; they don't. I've had a notion all the time that somebody blowed that reef so this new land would show. Chances are it was Varling and Hudson, but that ain't the point. You've got to consider the settlers' side of it."

"I'll consider it if they'll stay off the land till the courts settle whether I own it or not."

Miles jabbed a forefinger at the vast stretch of tulec-covered swamp running from within twenty feet of the store to the water's edge. "Bill,

that land never was yours because it wasn't land when your pa started Y Star. This is different than settlers moving onto grass land that's always been your range."

"Y Star needs hay land," Bill said stubbornly. "I talked to a lawyer today. He said I could make a mighty good case claiming that land as a riparian right."

"Riparian right or no riparian right, it ain't worth a killing."

"It there's any killing, it'll be Varling's doings. Or the nesters who have been listening to him."

Bill wheeled into the store and almost ran into Sally.

"You're full of big tough talk today," the girl said soberly. "I don't like you that way."

She was a medium tall girl, this Sally Miles, who insisted on wearing levis and a man's shirt, but still could not hide her natural feminine grace. Usually her full-lipped mouth held a smile for Bill, but now as he searched her face, he could find no hint of humor.

It was all a lot of damned monkey business and he wasn't going to let her see how he felt, so he cuffed back his Stetson and leaned against the counter.

"I'm taking you to the dance in Lake City Saturday night. Thought I'd tell you before I forgot it."

"I'm not going with a big proddy cowman," she snapped.

"How about putting on a dress, Sally? I've been wanting to see you fixed up purty for years."

Her lips tightened. "Bill, are you going to massacre those people?"

"Oh, might let a couple of the kids live. Sally, how about marrying me before the dance. Y Star sure needs a woman's hand."

"Y Star's owner needs a woman's hand holding a club and beating some sense into his head," she said angrily.

"Why not marry me and start pounding?" he asked hopefully.

"Look, Bill." She laid a hand on his arm, her face more serious than he had ever seen it. "You've got all the range clear to the Rainbow. You don't need this new land. Let them have it."

"You know Lang Varling?"

"I've heard of him."

"Then maybe you've heard what kind of huckleberry he is. He's bringing these nesters in. Chances are he's got 'em so worked up they won't listen to me. I've got just one thing to ask 'em. To stay off until the Land Office decides who owns this lake bottom."

"But there's women and children," Sally cried. "They've got a right to a home."

"And Y Star has a right to land that legally belongs to it. If they won't listen, then there will be trouble."

Bill stomped out. Mounting, he reined his horse around the store, thoroughly angry. Damn it anyhow, a woman didn't use her head to think with. It was just something for her hair to grow roots in. Women and children! Why, hell's bells, if the nesters couldn't wait for the law...

Raising his eyes, Bill saw that Jarvis Miles had saddled his gray mare and was riding out to meet the train. He swore bitterly, and poured steel to his roan. Miles had something up his sleeve, or he wouldn't sneak off like this.

"Couldn't you wait for 'em to roll in," Bill demanded as he pulled in beside the storeman.

"I figgered it would be better if I talked to 'em alone first. I was hoping Sally would keep you busy."

"Sally wasn't what you'd call right friendly," Bill said glumly. "She said my head needed beating with a club. I didn't think she was a nester lover."

"She isn't, Bill. It's just that she doesn't want trouble. Someday she'll say she loves you and she'll set the date for the wedding. Give her time. A woman's like a thoroughbred, Bill. They both take a lot of patience. Now don't lose your head and spoil it."

"If I keep my hay land, I'll lose my girl. If I let 'em tromp on me, I'll lose my land and keep my girl." He threw up his hands. "What a hell of a choice."

3

BILL AND Jarvis Miles rode in silence until they met the first wagon. The driver motioned for them to stop, handed the lines to his wife, and stepped down, a Winchester in his hands.

"Stand where you are," he called belligerently. "We don't aim to be driven from land that is rightfully ours to settle on."

"That jayhoo's ready to crack a cap right now," Bill muttered as he and Miles pulled up.

The rest of the wagons stopped. As if by previous arrangement, the men stepped down and came toward the head of the train. All carried Winchesters, and most of them packed Colts in stiff new holsters. It did not surprise Bill to see Rowdy Quinn with the settlers, his face battered and red with bruises.

"Let's palaver," Miles said. "Mebbe whiskers ain't so tough."

As they stepped down the settlers fanned out into a semicircle. The first driver, a bent bearded man with agate-pale eyes that flicked from Bill to Miles and back, seemed to be the leader. He moved forward until he was within five feet of Bill.

"You're Yale, ain't you, Mister?"

"That's right."

"You own Y Star and you're claiming the land that's been vacant when North Lake went down."

"You're guessing good today, friend."

"We've been warned about you," the settler said coldly. "I've got just one thing to say, Yale. We'll settle on that land and we won't be intimidated. It isn't your range and it never was. Now I'll take your gun. We don't want any trouble."

Bill stepped back. He said softly, "Friend, I never give my gun to anybody. What's more, you've listened to a yellow pup named Varling, and you've got things all wrong. Fetch him out here and you'll see."

"It wouldn't be wise." The nester motioned toward the back of the train. "I told him to stay there because I want to prevent trouble if I can. Just remember one thing, Yale. When the time comes that I can't prevent trouble, we'll fight. There are twenty-two of us, men and boys old enough to squeeze triggers. Maybe you've got enough men to wipe us out, but it'll be an expensive chore."

"You think I'd do that?"

"We've suffered at the hands of cattle kings before."

"If there's trouble, you'll be the one who makes it," Bill exploded. "It's your listening to Varling that makes you so damned sure there's going to be some."

"I want your gun," the settler said ominously.

"Ever hear of riparian right?"

"No, but I've heard of the Homestead Law."

"Quit fooling with him," Rowdy Quinn called through bruised lips. "Chances are he's got his killers over that next hill. Come night they'll ride in a-shootin'. Let's hang the son while we can."

"We're here to make homes," the bearded man said patiently. "We'll hang nobody until murder has been done."

"There's no sense asking Bill Yale for his gun," Jarvis Miles said. "Why don't you give him a chance to talk?"

"Who are you?"

Miles jerked his hand back toward the store building. "I own the North Lake store. It don't make no difference to me who owns this land. The only reason I'm here is to prevent bloodshed. There was a time when the only law in the lake country was Colonel Colt's law. We've outgrown it, but if you insist on going back to it, you'll find it's a law that Bill and his boys understand."

Bill felt the instinctive suspicion in these men that settlers had for cowmen. He saw the bearded man turn toward the others, saw the questioning looks that passed between them.

But Rowdy Quinn wanted a fight. "This bean peddler's lived off the cow outfit for years. We can't expect

nothing but a crooked deal from him. We've got Yale where we want him and I say to let him have a rope."

JARVIS MILES' face went a dull red. He didn't raise his voice, but it held a depth of cold anger when he said, "You don't look like an honest settler to me, and I'm not in the habit of being called a bean peddler. Drop your Winchester and come here if you feel like pushing your ideas."

"Sure."

Quinn laid his rifle in the grass, but he took only one step, for the bearded man covered him with his Winchester. "Get back, Quinn, and keep your mouth shut. I'll hear no more trouble talk out of you."

For a moment Rowdy Quinn glared his challenge at the settler. Then he lowered his gaze, and muttering an oath, stepped back into line.

The bearded man turned to Miles. "If you have a proposal, we'll listen."

"You've never heard of riparian right," Miles said. "Neither did I till today, but lawyers know a lot of things we've never heard of. It's something to think about if this comes to a court fight. I propose that you camp on the hill above the store. After supper we'll all be in a better temper for talking than we are now. Bill and I will come to your camp and we'll palaver."

"Reckon we won't do no settling tonight," the man said truculently. "Show us where to camp."

"Go back to the store, Bill," Miles said and swung into his saddle. He motioned with his hand. "Get 'em rolling."

Bill held little hope that talk would keep the settlers from moving in. Land-hungry as they were, they wouldn't be held back now that they were in sight of the pot of gold Lang Varling had promised them. He had, he thought gloomily, two choices. He could sit quietly by and watch them move onto the lake land that legally might be his, or he could call in enough buckaroos to keep the settlers forted up in their wagons. Both were wrong, but he could see no third course of action that offered any hope.

He told Sally that when he got back to the store, and added bitterly, "I suppose you want me to stand pat and let 'em move in."

"Did it ever occur to you that this land might not be yours?" she asked.

"I'm willing to wait till we find out."

"You know how long it takes Washington to act on something like this. They'll fiddle and faddle and send a special agent out here. It'll be months. What do you want these folks to do, just sit and look at the tules?"

"Sure, if they like the looks of 'em."

"Bill, when you father came here there was a question about who owned the land. Some was marked swamp land and some was open for entry. Did he wait until Washington told him which was which?"

"That was different."

"No, it wasn't. The only difference is that these folks are coming twenty years later."

"Sounds funny, hearing that from you," Bill said dully. "I've had myself some fine dreams about marrying you, figuring you'd make a good wife for a cowman, but I reckon I'm wrong, after listening to you preach about nester rights."

"I'm not preaching," she blazed. "If you weren't so mule-headed, you'd see their side."

BILL WHEELED out of the store. He sat down on the porch and smoked one cigarette after another, tossing the stubs in the direction of the tules. It would be a slow and expensive job clearing and draining the land so it would be fit for farming, a job that would likely be far beyond the resources of a group of homesteaders, yet that was exactly what they set their mind on doing.

Bill was still on the store porch when Jarvis Miles and the bearded leader of the homesteaders came around the corner of the building, the settler examining a handful of dirt as he walked.

"It's good soil, Miles," the settler

was saying, "and there's bound to be moisture from the lake. Gonna be a different proposition than trying to make a living in the desert." He saw Bill then, and wheeled, sudden panic showing in his face. He started to wave somebody back, and then dropped his hand as Lang Varling appeared behind him.

"You don't need to motion me back," Varling said with biting malice. "This huckleberry don't scare me a little bit."

Varling stepped up on the porch and came directly to Bill.

"If you ain't scared of me," Bill demanded, "why did you hire Quinn to tackle me in Lake City?"

Varling ignored the question. "I'm going to shove a few of your words down your throat, Yale. I'm a legitimate locator. I'm here with this group of settlers on legitimate business. Romain," he motioned to the homesteader, "tells me you called me a yellow dog and tried to turn him against me. I won't stand for it."

Bill rose. "You haven't got the guts to do anything about it. If you have, reach."

There were no words for a mo ment. No sound and no motion. Bill kept his eyes on Varling who gave him a straight look, but made no motion for his gun. Knowing the man as he did, Bill was sure the locator would made his play the moment his attention was diverted. Yet there was something else, a new tension that held Miles's and Romain's nerves tight. Romain was standing as if paralyzed on the corner of the porch. Jarvis Miles, too, was motionless.

Then Bill heard Sally's voice, cold and sharp as it broke into the silence. "This scattergun is loaded with buckshot. If you've ever seen what a man looked like when he stopped a load of buckshot, you'll stand still."

"Behind you, Bill," Miles said weakly.

"Thanks, Sally." Bill held his gaze on Varling. "So you had a play all rigged for me, did you? All right, feller. Let's just the two of us do this job."

Licking dry lips, Varling looked past Bill, and then brought his eyes back. "I didn't say I had a play rigged, Yale. I said I wasn't going to stand for you calling me a yellow dog and ruining my reputation with the settlers."

"Not so tough now, are you, Varling." Bill walked past the locator, Varling slowly turning and keeping his face to Bill. He, too, gradually swung around so that he could see the men who were on the other end of the porch and still watch Varling. They were Rowdy Quinn and Thad Hudson as Bill had guessed.

"Are you going to let me locate these people," Varling blustered, "or are you bent on making trouble?"

"I'll make trouble," Bill said flatly. "Plenty of it."

"Won't get you nowhere," Varling muttered.

"How'd you plan to pull this off?" Bill asked. "Figger on them cutting me down from behind? Or having them holler when I started to draw so I'd swing around and you could plug me without running any chances?"

"They just happened to be on the other side of the building." Varling turned to Miles. "I wanted to buy some things, but if your idea of running a store is having your daughter hold a shotgun on customers, I don't want to patronize you." He nodded at the bearded homesteader. "You see how it is, Romain. You can't trust Miles any more than you can trust Yale."

VARLING stomped off the porch, Hudson and Quinn trailing behind him. When they were gone, Bill asked Romain, "Did you tell Varling you had agreed to a palaver tonight?"

"Yeah, I told him."

"Then mebbe you can add two and two and get the right answer."

"What are you getting at?"

"Varling's afraid of a powwow. That's why he aimed to fix me so I couldn't talk."

Romain pulled uncertainly at his beard. Finally he said, "Might be you're right, Yale. This business looked a little funny. We started walking down to the store together, but when we got to the back end,

he told the other two to go down this side to see if you had anybody hid out. I didn't think you'd be here. When I saw you, I tried to get Varling to go back, not wanting any trouble, but he was bent on coming."

"Bill just told you why," Miles said sourly. "They had a killing in their minds, and they would have worked it so you'd have thought Bill started it."

But suspicion was rooted firmly in Romain's mind. He said, "I ain't so sure, Yale. I'm figgering on you trying to throw some scheme at us tonight so you can crook us out of this land, but I'm telling you straight. We won't be kept off."

"Then go to town and talk to a lawyer."

"No need for that. It ain't your land; Varling says it ain't. He was showing me from the hill how we could run a ditch and a few laterals down through there and drain the new land. When we get the water off the tules will die. No sir, Yale, we ain't gonna wait. No expensive lawyers and court trials for us. We're starting in the morning."

"Ever think that Varling has his own reasons for pushing you?" Bill asked.

"It gives him a job," Romain admitted.

"A job that'll pay him good before you're done. Besides, he's got his personal reasons for giving me a slug in the brisket."

"No use flopping our tongues," Romain said stiffly. "We'll listen to you tonight, but we won't change our minds. We're moving onto the land come morning. If you try to stop us, there'll be a fight." He jerked his head toward the store. "The old woman gave me a list of things to buy, Miles."

When Miles and Romain had disappeared into the store, Bill grinned ruefully at Sally. "Mighty lucky for me you had a scattergun handy. Thank you, Ma'am."

"I knew something was wrong when I saw those two pussy-footing along the side of the store." She laid a hand on Bill's arm. "Varling's the wickedest looking man I ever saw, and he's poisoned the settlers' minds so they won't listen, but does that make any real difference? Why not let it go?"

Bill cocked his head, eyes on the girl's face. "You're purty, Sally."

She stamped her foot. "Bill Yale, did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah, sure. Tell you what I'll do. I'll trade five thousand acres of hay land for a wife. How about marrying me tomorrow?"

Suddenly she wasn't angry. "I'll think about it while I cook supper," she said, and stepping around him, went into the store.

4

THEN BILL finished supper, he leaned back and patted his stomach with the air of a man who is well fed and without care.

"Your gal's an artist, Jarvis. A genuwine artist when it comes to peach pies. There's one thing I don't understand. How can she cook so good when she never wears a dress?"

"What's a dress got to do with it?" Sally demanded.

"How would it look for me to trail a herd to the railroad with a dress on?" Bill countered. "Be about as silly as you working in the kitchen with that getup on you've got."

"I don't see . . ." Sally began, and stopped suddenly, eyes on the door that led from the kitchen into the store. She whispered, "Varling's coming in."

Scooting back his chair, Bill laid his gun across his lap. Varling came on along the counter, saw Sally sitting at the table, and stepped into the kitchen.

There was a trace of a smile on Varling's thin-lipped mouth as he laid his gaze on Bill's face. "Thought I'd find you here, Yale. I've got a proposition to make, and I don't want to hear a lot of tough talk."

"You've talked to me twice in the last two days," Bill snapped, "and

both times your gab was bait to line me up for a slug."

"All right." Varling spread his claw-like hands in a gesture of defeat. "I missed. Now I want to talk business. I'm willing to forego the pleasure of seeing you dead." He paused, his smile gone. "For a price."

"Go ahead and spiel, but don't get no funny ideas or you'll be a dead pigeon."

Varling jerked his head at the door. "Let's go outside."

"Jarvis and Sally can hear anything I can."

"All right." Varling shrugged. "Yale, it strikes me we've been overlooking the easiest solution to our problem. I'm after the locating fee. It'll add up to a nice figure when I get all the families that are in Romain's party settled. You're interested in holding this land for Y Star because you need it for hay. Now suppose I rode away tonight with Hudson and Quinn. The settlers wouldn't know what to do without me. You could move a ditch crew into the tules and your troubles would be over. Romain and his bunch would holler awhile and then they'd move on."

"What's your proposition?"

"Pay me approximately what my locating fees would be and we'll ride out tonight. I don't give a damn about the nester outfit one way or the other."

"That's what I thought," Bill grated. "Git. Drag your ugly carcass out of here and keep going."

"Isn't my offer fair?"

"In the first place I wouldn't deal with a coyote who'd sell his own side out. In the second place I wouldn't have any guarantee they'd move on. In the third place I want the ownership of that land decided one way or the other."

"I see," Varling said softly. "All right, Yale. You're a fighting man. You're tough, but you sure as hell lack horse sense. Long as I'm here the settlers won't budge. The instant you move your tough hands in, there'll be a blood letting that'll make North Lake go down in Oregon history. You'll be branded as a killer. You'll never live it down."

"It strikes me that the horny-handed boys have got onto you. Otherwise you wouldn't be trying to make your own deal."

"You'll find out," Varling snarled, and stomped from the store.

Bill rose and holstered his gun. "Let's get our palavering started, Jarvis."

"You'd better have a proposition to offer," Miles said.

"I've got one. Fact is, I've had my brain boiling over a hot fire all day, but nothing came of it till just now. Varling gave me a notion. Sally, you'd better stay here. I don't aim to get kicked around by Varling or the clodbusters. If there's trouble . . ."

"I'm not staying here," she said hotly. "If you're going to start being the proddy cowman again, I want to be there to help trim you down."

"Might as well let her," Miles advised. "I learned a long time ago not to argue."

"All right," Bill said grimly. "I hope you can move fast enough to duck the bullets. Let's drift."

IT WAS dusk when the three of them moved up the hill to the wagons. Varling, Hudson and Quinn were at a fire with the settlers. When Bill came up he could see no change in the expression on the locator's thin bony face, but Hudson and Quinn were jumpy.

"No use beating around the bush," Romain said when Bill came to the fire. "We all know why we're here and we know why Yale's here. I promised him we'd have a powwow after supper, which same we'll have right now. Go ahead and have your say, Yale."

They stood across the fire from Bill, Winchesters cradled in their arms, as fiercely determined to possess land as the first emigrants who had crossed the plains to the Willamette valley had been. And Bill, eyes sweeping their weather-bronzed faces, could not blame them.

"I want you men to understand that I'm not trying to steal anything that ain't mine," Bill began, "and I'm not planning on hiring a bunch of gunslicks to murder you. Laws are

made to protect me and my property the same as it is to give you folks a square deal. If you'll do your part in letting the law operate, I'll do mine."

"Fine talk," Quinn jeered. "I'm a settler, but I know a little more about the way you perform . . ."

"Quinn, you'll shut up till Yale gets done, or get out of here," Romain said sharply.

Bill's gaze brushed Sally's face. He saw something new in her eyes, something he'd hoped to see a long time and never had. He knew now that what he did and said tonight would determine Sally's answer to his question whether it determined anything else or not.

"I believe this land is mine by riparian right," Bill went on. "You believe it's open to entry. We can't both be right, and there's no reason to kill men over it. I propose that we ride into Lake City tomorrow and talk to a lawyer. We'd better send a letter pronto to the Land Office so we can get a decision on this."

Bill paused, eyes again sweeping the line of settlers. Their faces showed less hostility than he had felt that afternoon when he'd talked to them in front of the wagon train. Instead, they were nodding agreement as if actually friendly to his proposal.

IT WAS this friendliness that worried him. It might be a mask to hide their feelings. On the other hand, if it was real, Varling and his men would not accept defeat easily. Bill, glancing again at Sally, wanted to live now more than he'd ever wanted to live before in his life.

"Sounds reasonable," Romain said as if convinced.

That surprised Bill. He'd said nothing more than he'd said to Romain before. Then he'd drawn only a stubborn answer that they'd move in anyhow.

"What's the matter with you, Romain?" Varling snarled. "What are you going to do while you wait for the Land Office to decide, sit here and live off your savings?"

This was what Bill had been waiting for. Varling had made a mistake.

"I've thought about that," Bill said, "and I've got a proposition. If I get the land I'll want it ditched and drained, and I'll pay any reasonable amount to get the work done. If you get it, it's work you'll want done. It's my notion that we ought to draw up a contract tomorrow when we're in town. You'll agree to vacate if the Land Office decides against you and I'll pay for your work. If it decides against me, I'll agree to drop all legal action. In fact, I'll contract to buy your hay, and I'll pay you as much as you'll get anywhere else. Is that fair, Romain?"

"It's as square a proposition as I ever heard," Romain agreed. "We'll have to vote on this, Yale, but I'm sure we'll accept."

"Romain, I know this man," Varling said in the most pious voice he could manage. "I know his record and how he's treated other settlers. His word isn't worth a damn. You'll do his work and he'll cheat you out of your pay. The thing to do is to move onto the land tomorrow. Once you're in possession . . ."

"No, Varling," Romain said.

"Don't be a fool, man," Varling cried in desperation. "I have your interest at heart. The only thing I want is to see this country grow."

"You're lying," Romain said calmly. "You've lied to us about Yale from the first, and we believed you because we never thought that a cattleman could be on the square with settlers."

"I'm not lying, Romain. I tell you I know what kind of a double-crossing cheating coyote Yale is."

"You're talking words I don't like to hear used on me, Varling," Bill said challengingly. "Romain, he came into the store this evening offering to clear out if I'd pay him an amount equal to the locating fee you would have paid. He said you wouldn't know what to do, so you'd move on and I'd have the land."

"He's a damned liar," Varling howled. "I wouldn't make a deal like that with him. I tell you I have the interest of the settlers . . ."

"You use the word liar carelessly, my friend," Romain said coldly, "for a man who treats the truth the way

you do. I was outside the window when you made that proposition and I know Yale is talking straight. You'd like to work up a fight so you'd be rid of Yale. Is that it, Varling?"

The locator had stepped back, mouth twitching. A settler yelled, "Let's hang the bunch of 'em," and started toward Varling.

It was Thad Hudson who grabbed his gun first with a squall, "They'll never hang me."

"Get Sally out of here, Jarvis," Bill shouted.

BILL HAD expected it to break. His hand drove downward with Hudson's first motion. The muzzle of his gun cleared leather and flame danced into the thin light, the roar beating against Bill's eardrums. There was a satisfaction in it; the buck of the hard butt against his palm, the thunder and the jetting ribbon of gun fire, satisfaction because these were the men who had planned his death. Not face to face, but by a back-shooting trap. Now Thad Hudson died with a bullet in his heart.

But there had been three of them. It was a tight the same as in the Lake City saloon where the barman's shotgun had kept Hudson and Varling from pulling gun on Bill when he was fighting Rowdy Quinn. The odds were still too long. He told himself that in the split second it took him to turn his gun on Lang Varling.

Then Bill Yale knew the odds were not long at all. Romain's rifle had cracked and Varling folded at the middle. Quinn yelled a shrill scream of fear, and started to run. Bill drove a bullet over his head. Quinn fell and gained his feet and turned, hands high.

"Let's hang him," a homesteader bellowed. "He's been talking about a rope all day. Let's give him one."

Then Bill was beside him, lifting his gun and turning back to the settlers. He said, "No hanging."

"He's committed no crime," Jarvis Miles called.

"It's not his fault he hasn't," Romain said bitterly.

"Quinn, did you and Varling and Hudson blow the sand reef?" Bill asked.

Quinn nodded, struggling with his fear a moment before he could speak. "We blowed it to drain the water off the land. Figgered all the time on bringing settlers in."

"Git." Bill motioned with his gun. "Keep traveling." He waited until Quinn disappeared into the darkness. Then he turned back to Romain and held out his hand. "If you can forget what Varling said about me, we'll make out fine. Maybe we can prove that cowmen and settlers can be neighbors."

"We'll get along," Romain promised. "I don't usually go around listening under windows, but the more I thought about the play Varling and the other two fixed up in front of the store, the more it looked to me like we'd been believing the wrong man. When I heard him proposition you I knew we had."

"Funny Varling came up with that deal," Bill said thoughtfully.

"Maybe it was his way of making twice the money," Romain said. "Chances are he figgered on taking your pay and locating us to boot."

Bill nodded. "See you in Lake City tomorrow." He moved around the fire to where Sally stood beside her father. "One thing's been decided tonight. Let's take a walk and settle another question."

Sally put her arm through his. "Bill," she said as they walked down the hill to the store, "I guess I haven't understood you very well. I had the idea you were going to talk big and tough to those people. I can't stand that in anybody, but you didn't. You were fair."

"Why not, I'm glad you see it partly my way. About this business of getting married."

Her kiss was her answer. Then she asked, "Am I going to have to put on a dress to marry you?"

"It's a custom," he said.

She sighed. "Oh, well, "I've got to start in someday."

THE END

Swansong For

Complete Novelet

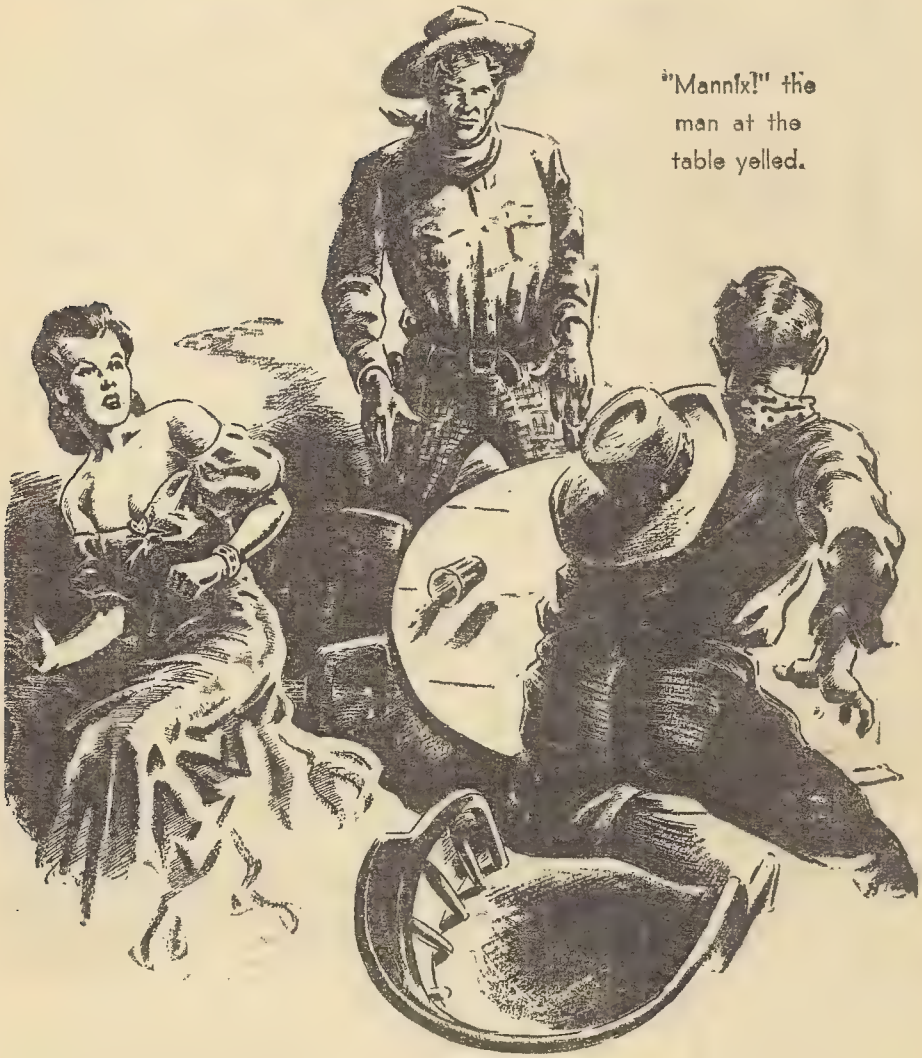
1

MANNIX rode into the roaring boomtown called Hell's Acres, that night and this was his homecoming, this was his town; but there was no pleasure in it. He had none of the sensations a man was supposed to feel, coming back to his own part of the country, the first time in eight years. There was no soaring nor singing in his heart; his heart was a cold thing in his chest.

A stringy built, long drink of water Mannix was, slumped in the saddle of the big grey, but with that lean, tensile strength in his rangy body that lanky men often have.

Sixguns

By Robert Turner



"Mannix!" the man at the table yelled.

When Ed Mannix came back to Hell's Acres, it was for one purpose, which included vengeance on Jay Ringold, the man responsible for his family's destruction. Then he found still deadlier snakes operating and he would have to make an alliance with the lesser evil!

Dressed simply in a sweat-stained blue work shirt, red neckerchief and rumpled levis, at first impression Mannix looked like just another saddle-bum. But then you saw the new, flat-crowned black Stetson tied under-chin with a leather thong and the expensive hand-tooled black boots. You saw the sleek, pearl-handle twin .44's in their black holsters. You looked at the high-boned, beard-stained cheeks and the cold flat gaze of the gray eyes between them, the wide, taut mouth and the continually restless movement of the long, quick-looking hands of Mannix. And you changed your mind about Mannix.

He suddenly reined the big grey to one side as a string of ore and freight wagons, followed by an outgoing stage, came thundering up Main Street and past him on great clouds of dust. Then he raised his head and loosened the reins and the grey jogged on. Past brightly flare-lit honky tonks, gaming casinos and saloons, Mannix rode, his eyes, from under their thin ledges of black brows, taking everything in. A slightly sardonic grin curled the corners of his mouth as he saw the names of these places on the great signs that hung over the false-fronted buildings. The names of the building were different, but each had something in common. In smaller letters under the names of most of Hell's Acres' Main Street establishments, were the words: J. Ringold, Prop.

Mannix turned the grey into the livery stable and blacksmith shop at the end of the street. A squat man, naked to the waist and with perpiration sheening his great, muscle-bound torso came through the red glow from the forges. He had black walrus mustaches and dancing brown eyes. He and Mannix exchanged greetings and Mannix issued instructions for the care of the grey. Then he said:

"Jasper Mannix doesn't own this stable any more?"

The smithy shook his shaggy-haired head, wiped sweat from his forehead with his forearm. "Uh-uh," he said. "Not for three-four years, now. Jasp Mannix sold out to Jackson Ringold, just like the rest of the Mannixes and everybody else around here."

The blacksmith's powerful shoulders shrugged. "Got himself kilt. Some saloon fight or somethin'."

MANNIX turned and left the stable. Out on the plank walk of Main Street, he moved toward the saloons, pushing through crowds of miners and mule-skinners and laughing, drunken gold camp riff-raff. He had trouble, making his way and he remembered back to when a half a dozen people all in a group, would have been a crowd here on Main Street. The jostling of the mob made him a little angry and he began to use his shoulders more than he should. Several men he bumped resented it and started to reach for him. Then they saw the set of his head, the hard shine of his eyes and the muscle ridging the rim of his jaw, and decided to forget about it.

He came to what had once been Clay Mannix's Barber Shop. It was now the Hells Acres Tonsorial Parlor; J. Ringold, Prop., he went inside anyhow and bought himself a haircut, shave and a bath in the backroom from a tub of dingy looking rainwater. All the barbers were strange to him and the place had been all changed over, fancied up. He remembered, bitterly, getting his first shave in this place and how proud and flustered he'd been when old Clay Mannix, his father's cousin, had laughed and asked him:

"You want I should use a razor or just rub some cream on and let the cat lick off that fuzz."

But there had been a satisfactory scraping of the blade against his beard, later and he had felt better when old Clay, chuckled and told him: "You make me feel plumb old. Little Eddie Mannix, Big Ed's younker, growed-up and growin' whiskers, already."

Being in that barber shop, remem-

bering things like that, hadn't done Ed Mannix any good. It brought temper rising hot and unruly to his head, knowing that old Clay and Big Ed, his father, were dead now, and how they had gone. And that wasn't good, so he fought it off, because he had to keep his wits and remain deliberate and cold-blooded about this job he had to do.

The information he got in the barber shop did him some good, though. It was a gossip center and a few casually dropped questions and remarks brought him a lot of talk. His suspicion that Jackson Ringold, who had taken over and made himself king of this little helltown, wasn't liked and had made some powerful enemies, was confirmed. He made a mental note of the names, Kirk Burnham and Bull Patterson, who were apparently prominent in the unorganized opposition against Ringold's strong-arm reign. He also heard a lot of mention of the name Rupe Calligy, who seemed to be Ringold's right hand and almost equally hated.

After the barber shop, Mannix's next call was at the Acres House, the town's hotel. A runty little man in a celluloid collar and with great, square, hornrimmed glasses over his myopic eyes, was behind the desk. As he registered for a room, Mannix said:

"You got any other Mannixes registered, right now?"

The desk clerk's prominent Adam's apple made a fast hop between his receeding chin and the celluloid collar. "Mannix?" he repeated the name in a hushed tone, almost a whisper. "Hell, man, ain't been no Mannix in Hell's Acres, three-four years, right after the first gold strike up on Big Hatchet Mountain. All died or was druv out—one or t'other." He leaned closer. "That ain't exactly a healthy name to mention around town much, son. I just thought I'd better warn..." He broke off suddenly, gulping. "You said, 'any *other* Mannixes'. You one of 'em?"

The clerk pushed his face down close to the register, traced the signature with his forefinger. "Edward R. Mannix, Hell's Acres. Well, I'll be..."

"I been away," Ed Mannix said. "I've just come home. If I'm not back in a couple of hours to use that room, you might as well let somebody else have it." He turned and strode out of the hotel and into the bedlam of Main Street again.

A LETHARGY stole over Mannix, now. He'd ridden far, today and the strain of coming back and seeing what had happened to his home town of Hell's Acres had been strong. All the things he'd heard about the town and what had happened to his father and his kinfolk, had been difficult to believe. He'd known them to be true of course. There had been no reason for Len Cleary to make up something lik that. But coming home and seeing the absolute, concrete proof was still a shock; now reaction was trying to set in. After the bath and shave, the strain and tiredness was telling on him. He would be glad when the thing that he had to do first was over and he could come back and grab a good night's sleep, to rest up for the big, long job ahead of him.

He came into the great flickering orange glow of the flares that lit up the facade of the Gold Ring Saloon and Gambling Casino. A bulbous-nosed barker in his warped and dented tophat and shabby finery, grabbed Mannix's arm and chanted the come-on into his face. Mannix shoved the barker roughly away.

He looked up at the sign that had once said, simply: Big Ed Mannix's Place. J. Ringold, Proprietor wasn't marked on this sign; it didn't have to be. The title of the place was an obvious twist of its owner's name. This was the part of his job that Mannix didn't like. But he had promised Len Cleary before he died and if Mannix waited until later, he might not be alive to carry out that promise. He drew a deep breath and pushed

through the batwings into The Gold Ring.

WHEN Mannix's father had owned this place, when Hell's Acres was just another little cow-town and stage coach terminal, it had been more than just a saloon. It had been sort of a town meeting place, where Big Ed and the rest of the Mannixes held sway and settled differences and disputes for the rest of the town's small business men. Gun rule had just about died out there, under the wise and friendly jurisdiction of Big Ed and his kinfolk.

Young Ed Mannix saw just how much that had all changed now. Blue smoke hung in thick strata over the saloon. The roistering noise of the place rang your eardrums. Lawlessness ran rampant, he saw. At a table near the door, Mannix saw a painted, bleached-blonde percentage girl boldly pick the pocket of a drunken miner. At another table, a pallid-faced, black suited gambler, cold sober, was double-dealing to a group of worn, bleary-eyed mule-skinners, hardly able to sit up in their chairs.

Ringold had installed a huge set of second-hand, battered looking crystal chandeliers. Their gaudy light shone down through the fog of smoke. The bar had been lengthened and was jammed three deep. The rest of the room was cluttered with gambling tables. In the back of the place was a small stage, that held a broken down piano and the tall, crimson-gowned figure of a woman.

The piano was clanking out the ragged beat of a jig-time tune and the woman was singing with it, her voice barely distinguishable above the general hubbub of the saloon. She was a tall woman, Mannix saw, with a matured, fully-rounded figure. Her sunset-red hair was piled up in a high pompadour. Her eyes looked enormously dark in the creamy whiteness of her face. She didn't look anything like her brother, Len this Marcia Cleary. She didn't look anything like the gangly pig-tallied kid she had been when Mannix had left home, six years before, either. But he would have known that thatch of red hair anywhere.

He watched her come down off the stage, now, as the piano stopped its thumping, the song ended and he pushed through the dense jumble of tables toward her. Just before he reached her, she sat down at one of the tables near the stage. There was a man sitting there at that table, waiting for her. He poured whiskey from a bottle into a thick tumbler and held it up in a toast to Marcia Cleary, as she sat down.

As he walked toward them, Mannix saw that the man at the table with Marcia was a massive bear of a fellow. He had a huge, bullet-shaped head, topped with close-cropped, corn-colored, curly hair. His misshapen features sprouted a thick growth of pale beard stubble that reached up right under his tiny sunken eyes. The head set, almost neckless, on sloping bull-shoulders. A cowhide v e s t, trimmed with fancy hand-stitching, hung loosely over a stained and dirty red wool shirt. The hand that held the tumbler of whiskey had fingers like sausages and the back of it was covered with matted blonde hair.

Mannix stood by their table and looked down at Marcia Cleary, ignoring the man. He said, brusquely: "I've got a mesage from your brother Len. If I could speak to you a moment, alone . . ."

"Len!" Marcia Cleary's eyes green eyes stared up at him out of the pale, powdered beauty of her face. She looked scared and shocked. "Len—my brother's been dead for nearly two years. I—I received notification from the government. He died in a Union Hospital. I..."

"I know." Mannix cut her off. "I was with him. I was with him when he got a Johnny Reb ball in his lung. I got it in the hip and the shoulder, the same time. I was in the same hospital with him, in the next bed when he died."

She put her hand up over her eyes for a moment, then looked up at him again. "I—I thought you looked familiar," she said, "You—You're young Ed Mannix! Len wrote once that

he—that you and he were together."

A gutteral sound came from the man across the table from Marcia. He lunged up to his feet and the chair fell over behind him. His enormous overhang of belly hit the table and the tumbler over-turned and whiskey sloshed across the table, ran dripping over the edge.

"Mannix!" the big man roared. "I thought we'd cleaned out that clan. I thought every dirty dog of a Mannix was dead or long-gone from here. Where the hell did you come from?"

2

ED MANNIX'S gray eyes took the other man in, with one sweeping glance. He saw the towering height, the powerful, barrel-thick chest and long, gorilla-like arms. He hooked thumbs into his gun-belt and felt the red dabs of temper flushing his thin cheeks and the hot core of anger balling into flame inside his gut. Somehow, he held himself in check. He said through is teeth:

"Look, brother, I don't know you and I don't want any trouble with you. All I want is a word with Marcia Cleary here and then I'll leave you alone. Savvy?"

The big man swayed on his spraddled feet. His head hung forward a little. His small, moist mouth curled in contempt. "He don't want no trouble, he says. Then you'd better git away from this here gal, pronto, Mannix, cause she ain't Marcia Cleary no more. She's Marcia *Ringold*. Mrs. Jackson Ringold. And the boss don't want no coyote whelp of the Mannix clan botherin' her, either." He reached his big hands toward Mannix.

Ed Mannix dropped his hands to his gun butts. He said, quietly: "Stay away from me, Calligy. I guess that's who you are. I heard about you."

Rupe Calligy dropped his fists, warily eyeing Mannix's restless fingers caressing the twin .44's. He laughed a roaring, booming sound in the sudden silence of the saloon. At surrounding tables, men had suddenly stopped their merriment, the laughter and the talking.

"So you've heard of me, eh, Mannix?" Calligy roared. "Well, I've heard of you, too. You were the only one of your breed lucky enough not to be around when Jackson and I cleaned out the town, here. You'd gone away, they said, looking for a little excitement as a cheap, hired gun-slick down around the border. Then you decided to play tin soldier with a lot of other locoed young fools in a dam' silly war. You..."

"Shut your big mouth, Calligy!" Mannix stopped him. He felt his wrists throbbing with anger; he stood statue stiff, all his muscles aching and taut.

Calligy's fat-buried little eyes flicked toward Mannix's gun. "If you weren't packin' all that hardware," he growled, "I'd heist you up and heave you from here clean out through those batwings without bouncin' once! Like all the Mannixes you only talk large when you've got a man at a disadvantage."

Slowly, Ed Mannix lifted his long fingers from the butts of his .44's, to the gun belt, unhooked it. He took the belt off, draped it carefully over the back of a nearby chair, stepped back, his fists flexing, then balling at his sides. "I'm a little sick of shooting," he said, dead-low. "I'll like it better this way. It'll be a pleasure to have you try to make good on that braggin'."

A GRIN split Rupe Calligy's ugly features, showed his yellow, scraggled teeth. He lifted his huge arms from his sides and took a slow, deliberate step toward Mannix. A heavy chuckling came from his chest.

Mannix waited, watching the other man closely. He felt a little bit foolish, now. He'd done his share of roughand-tumble in dozens of barrooms along the border; but he'd never tackled a mountain of a man like Calligy. Doubts crept into his mind as to whether he could handle the big man. He knew suddenly, from the leer of the other man's face that

this would be a fight to the death. He wished now that he hadn't let the other man goad him into it. Not that he was afraid of dying; he'd been too close to death, too many times, on the battlefields and in gun-brawls before that, to have any fear of that left. But he'd come here for two reasons: to tell Marcia about her brother Len and to settle with Jackson Ringold, the man who had cheated and tricked the Mannixes out of their rightful places in Hell's Acres—and then had them killed.

Now, if he lost this fight with Rupe Calligy, both those missions would remain unaccomplished.

He braced himself for Calligy's savage onslaught as the big man started his lunge. But it never came. A shot suddenly rang out and glass chipped and flew from one of the chandeliers and the fixture swayed and swung on its hangings, its lamps flickering.

Both Calligy and Mannix swung about toward the door of the saloon, in surprise. They saw four men standing there, just inside the batwings. They were poorly, roughly dressed, in faded levis and dirty checkered workshirts. They held drawn Colts in their hands.

One of them stepped forward from the others a little. The Colt in his right hand still dribbled smoke from the shot that had rocked the chandelier. He was tall and skeleton thin, his face like a skull's, the skin pulled like dry parchment over the bone structure. His eyes burned bright and feverish deep in their hollowed sockets. He was hatless and strands of his long, unkempt black hair straggled down across his pony forehead.

Mannix heard a man at a table behind him, whisper: "Kirk Burnham! I knowed the trouble between him and Ringold was goin' to come to a head, soon!"

Kirk Burnham showed the stumps of his blackened teeth momentarily in a quick grin. He said in a nasal twang: "Y'all sit tight right where y'are at your tables. Nobody moves a hand, nobody gets hurt. Course, if y'all want a mite of excitement, it's all right with us."

He paused and nodded toward the man to his right, a short, bowlegged stocky man, with a moon face and wide, vacuous, pale blue eyes. He added: "M'pard, Bull Patterson, here, has a half notion to shoot up this hell-hole, as it is. It wouldn't take much to get him started."

He waved his Colt-filled hand. "Spread out boys. Keep your eye ond ever'body and smoke down the first one who moves a hair. I aim to do a little palaverin' with that big tub o' blubber, Calligy."

Kirk Burnham crossed the saloon, with long, ambling strides. He stopped a couple of yards away from Calligy and Mannix. He grinned at Mannix, said: "Looks like we busted up a little set-to between you and barrel-belly, here, stranger. Whoever you are, I admire the way you was standin' up to him and I'm sorry to interfere.

CALLIGY snorted, snarled: "What's the idea of this, Burnham? When Ringold hears about it, he'll have you and your little pack of rats strung up right in the middle of Main Street."

"Don't reckon he will," Kirk Burnham drawled. "Calligy, you and Ringold been running this town too damned long. We tried to get together enough men to take you over and run you out. But we couldn't recruit moren' a couple with gizzards enough to buck you. So we're usin' strategy, instead o' force."

Burnham jerked his head toward Marcia Ringold. "You," he ordered, gruffly, "Ringold's wife, come over here."

Marcia twisted her hands, nervously. She looked from Mannix and Calligy to Burnham. Her large green eyes stared fascinated at the Colt in Burnham's skinny hand as it swung slightly toward her. "You heard what I said!" Burnham said, sharply.

Mannix knew Burnham's breed. He'd gun-fought a lot of them, down around the border. He knew that Burnham and Bull Patterson weren't

fighting Jackson Ringold because of any altruistic motive. They merely wanted to take the reign of power over the boomtown away from Ringold and use it themselves. They were coyote-mean and desperate men, who would shoot first and ask questions after. Knowing this, Mannix said, quietly:

"Marcia, you'd better do like he says. He means business!"

Slowly, Marcia Ringold edged toward Kirk Burnham who was saying, now: "Since we can't take the town Calligy, we're goin' to leave you have it all to yourselves. But first we're goin' to milk it."

Burnham reached out and grabbed Marcia's wrist, with his free hand, as soon as she came close enough. She tried to twist free but his long, bony fingers held her powerless. "We're takin' Miz Ringold with us, Calligy. We'll be holed up in the cave on the South side of Big Hatchet. If Ringold wants to get her back safe, tell him to come out there alone, tomorrow, with fifty thousand dollars in cash!"

"He—he ain't got that much cash on hand!" Calligy exploded. "You're a crazy damned fool, Burnham, to think Ringold's gonna let you get away with this!"

"He'd better raise that dinero, somewhere," Kirk Burnham said. He stooped, quickly and grabbed Marcia around the waist, slung her over his thin shoulder. She kicked and squirmed and beat at his back with her fists but Kirk Burnham only grinned as he backed toward Bull Patterson and the other two men who were covering him.

The other three waited until Burnham got outside and mounted with his prisoner, before they made their move toward the door. At the last moment, their Colts roared as they threw a shower of lead over the heads of the crowd. Then they turned and were gone on a rataplan of pounding hoofbeats, with a last thin scream of the girl they had kidnapped, hanging in the night air.

Everyone in the Gold Ring sat thunderstruck for a moment. Then several men reached for their irons, scrabbled toward the door. "Hold it!" Mannix yelled. "You can't shoot after them; you might hit the girl!" He reached out and grabbed his own belt and holstered guns from the chair-back, slung them around his hips.

Rupe Calligy turned on him. "You're mixed up in this, Mannix. You came sashayin' in here and purposely started trouble with me so as to take everybody's attention and let them sidewinders get the drop on the place."

"Don't talk like a damned fool!" Mannix told him. "I never saw those hombres before in my life. Where's Jackson Ringold, anyhow? How come he's not here tonight?"

"He's away," Calligy said. "He's due back in on the mornin' stage. He's been down to Black River on business. There's goin' to be plenty hell to pay when he finds out about this."

"Yeah," Mannix admitted. "But I got a notion it'll be Ringold does the payin'. That cave on south side of Big Hatchet can be held by a few men for weeks, if they got enough stores in. And don't forget you won't be able to go bustin' in on 'em; they have Marcia."

HE WATCHED that reasoning penetrate the big man's confused brain, saw him sit down hard in a chair and put his head between his hands. Mannix said: "Looks like we'll have to put off our little showdown for awhile, Calligy. But I ain't forgetting the poison you shot off out of your mouth tonight. You tell Ringold, he can find me down at the Acres House, when he gets in tomorrow. Maybe I can figure some way for him to get his wife back."

Mannix hitched up his gunbelt then and with the eyes of every man in the place on him strode out of The Gold Ring.

Up in his hotel room, Mannix sprawled out on the narrow iron-runged bed and forced the things that had happened tonight out of his mind. Exhaustion crept over him and

in a few minutes he was dead to the world.

A little after sunup, the next morning, Mannix was up and dousing his face with the fetid water in the cracked bowl on his dresser, when a knock sounded on the door. Toweling his face dry, he swung the door open to find Rupe Calligy and another man standing there. He stepped aside and they entered the toom. Calligy, his eyes still puffy with sleep said nothing, just glared at Mannix.

The other man was about average height, compactly built. He wore an expensive store-bought black frock coat, and a silk shirt with a black, shoe-string tie. A silver-mounted Colt was holstered against one hip. He had a freshly barbered, full-jawed face, with just the slightest trace of jowel. His mouth was a thin, pink line, with deep parenthesis-like marks grooving toward it from each side of his hawk-like nose. His eyes were long and narrow, a yellow-flecked amber color. In a deep resonant voice, he said:

"I'm Jackson Ringold, Mannix. Calligy, here, said something about you having an idea how to help me get my wife back from those cowardly blackguards who abducted her last night."

Mannix went over and sat back down on his bed. He picked up his boots, shined them briskly on the sleeve of his shirt before putting them on. Then he stood up again.

"Ringold," he said. "I'm going to be honest with you; I hate your guts. I came here with a perhaps foolish notion to wage a one-man war against you because you came to Hell's Acres when the town started booming and using every dirty trick in the book, cheated and robbed my kinfolk out of their homes and businesses and took over the town. When you were through with that, all the Mannixes--and any others who had sided with them, sort of disappeared, or got shot-up in a faked barroom brawl."

Ringold's eyes shifted from Mannix for a moment. The corner of his thin mouth twitched. He shrugged. "This suddenly became a hell town, Mannix. It was every man for his own self. There were no rules. I happened to be lucky."

"Don't try to hooraw me!" Mannix told him, heatedly. And then he got control of himself, sighed. "Right now, that's beside the point. Right now, because of your wife's danger, Ringold, I'm willing to forget our differences for awhile. If we join forces, I've got an idea how we can rescue her from the Burnham-Patterson gang."

3

RINGOLD'S amber eyes narrowed. "Just what is your interest in Marcia, Mannix?" he demanded.

Ed Mannix took a deep breath. "It's a long story. Marcia's brother, Len and I were buddies in the Army. He died on a hospital bed next to me, of wounds, received, fighting alongside of me. Just before he died, he made a request.'

"What was that?"

"Len didn't know Marcia had married you. Last he'd heard, she was just working for you, singing in your saloon. Anyhow, Len got married, up north, just before he went away to fight. His wife had a little girl, but there was some trouble at birth and Mrs. Cleary never got over it. She died. Some neighbors are taking care of Len Cleary's kid. He made me promise that I'd get to Marcia and tell her about this. Get her to go up and get the younker and make a home for it."

"That's r i d i c u l o u s," Ringold snorted. "I don't see where that's any concern of Marcia's or mine. The child is probably better off with the people that have it now."

"That's for Marcia to decide," Mannix said. "But she can't do much about it where she is now. I think I can help you get your wife back, safely, Ringold, if you promise me one thing?"

"That is?"

"You'll let Marcia go up and get

Len's little girl, let her make a home for it. You do that and I'll help you get Marcia back. And I'll leave town, forget about the revenge I was going to get for what you did to my folks. It's more important that Len's child is taken care of. You're rich and can give it every advantage. I owe it to Len to see that it works out that way."

Jackson Ringold paced up and down the room, briefly, his brand new shiny boots creaking slightly. Different expressions flitted over his heavy features. Finally he stopped in front of Mannix. "What's your plan in getting Marcia out of the hands of Burnham and Patterson? "I'll do anything to get her back safely, Mannix."

"That's on your oath?"

Ringold raised his right hand and leaned forward intently as Mannix said: "It's a simple plan, but because of that, I think it'll work. Kirk Burnham saw that I was having a fuss with your man, Calligy, here, last night. They probably have heard about the Mannixs and what happened to them. When I go to them and tell them who I am and that I want to join forces with them, I think they'll believe me."

Ringold looked startled. "What do you mean?"

Mannix gestured simply with his hands. "It only takes one man to guard the entrance to that cave. You and Calligy can hide back out of sight and I'll approach the cave alone. I'll tell whoever's guarding the entrance, my story. I think they'll be glad of the chance to get an extra man on their side, in case there should be any trouble. If I get a chance, then and there, I'll overpower the guard, and then signal you two. We can enter the cave then and catch the others by surprse. If the guard is too suspicious and doesn't give me a chance, I'll get him to call the others out to check. When they all get out there in the open, away from Marcia, inside, you and Calligy, can drop them from your hiding place."

Ringold thought about that, his full-featured face, creased with frown lines. Rupe Calligy slapped his big hands together, said, excitedly: "You know that ain't a bad idea, Mr. Ringold. It's just loco enough that it might work."

Snapping his fingers, Ringold said, abruptly. "It's worth a try, Mannix. Can you leave right away?" When Mannix nodded, he went on: "I'll have Rupe saddle some horses for us and we'll meet you in front of the saloon."

ED MANNIX nodded grimly and picked up his gunbelt, fastened it on, as the other left the room. A few minutes later, he walked down the ricketty steps and out onto the Main Street, deserted now, practically, in the strong early morning sunlight. With the glow of the flares gone, in the deadly revealing light of the sun, the main street of Hell's Acres, with its false-fronted buildings, had lost its glamor and excitement. It looked like what it was, now, a dirty little trail town that had suddenly grown too big for its own breetchs and had sprawled from the center into a cancerous growth of little shacktowns and tent cities.

Shivering a little in the cool morning air and gloomily reflecting on the ironic twist fate and the team of Burnham and Patterson had given his plans, Ed Mannix clumped along the plank walk to meet and join forces with his sworn enemies.

The three men rode out of Hell's Acres onto the old stage coach trail that led to the south side of Big Hatchet mount, whose craggy peak towered into the blue haze of morning, about ten miles away. None of them spoke the whole distance and it was mid-morning and sweating hot in the glaring sun, when they turned off the trail, finally, at the foot of the mountain and started up a narrow, boulder-clogged old Indian trail that led into Lost Horse Canyon.

Ed Mannix's lean features were dust-caked and his shirt clung clammily to his back. Rupe Calligy puffed and fumed and cursed alternately at the heat and sun and at Burnham and Patterson for bringing on this situa-

tion. Jackson Ringold rode stolidly silent, looking at neither of the other men. Both he and Calligy carried Winchesters as well as the sixguns slung around their hips.

Lost Horse Canyon was a long dead-end cut in the side of the mountain about a mile from the foot. The three men rode along the bed of a dried up stream that ran along the bottom of the canyon, the echo of their mounts' hoofbeats clanging back and forth between the steep cliffs that rose up on each side of the canyon. About a mile into the canyon, just before it made a sudden sharp turn, Ed Mannix reined in his mount. He said:

"We'd better proceed from here on foot. Sound carries between these cliffs and they might hear the echo of our horses' hoofs on the rock. We can't take any chances."

Stiffly, they dismounted, tethered the horses to some scrub pine and made their way along the rocky old river bottom. When they came to the turn in the canyon, Mannix put out his arms and stopped them. Softly, he said: "The cave is half way up the cliff, just around the turn. If you and Calligy climb up from this side, you'll be completely hidden." He pointed up to a needle-like projection of rock protruding from the side of the cliff. "When you reach that sharp point of rock, you'll be just a little above the level of the cave, so that you can look down onto the entrance. When you get there, don't climb any higher, but move forward and around the curve. I'm going to go up the regular trail, facing the cave. I'll make a lot of fuss to attract the guard's attention and to cover up any noise you make, climbing."

MANNIX MOVED on, then, around the canyon curve and looked up. There was an almost natural zig-zag trail through the rocks and up the precipice-like side of the canyon. At the end of it, halfway up the cliff, was the mouth of the cage. There was an over-hang of rock above it and on either side, completely vertical and worn so smooth by some ancient erosion that it would be impossible to climb up or down it. Thus the only possible access to the cave was by the route Mannix was taking. And he was completely at the mercy of anyone above, having to use both hands and feet in the steep climb.

Before he'd gone very many yards up the cliff, a voice echoed out over the canyon: "Stand where you are. Climb another step and you get cut down!"

Mannix recognized the whining drawl of Kirk Burnham. He cupped his hands and shouted back: "Don't shoot! I just want to palaver with you It's Ed Mannix; I want to join your gang!"

There was moment's hesitation, then the voice ordered: "Shuck your hardware, then. Leave it down there and come up nekkid!"

Mannix unhooked his gunbelt and hung it over a sharp jut of rock, then began to climb again. Several minutes later, he came out into the small, level clearing in front of the cave. In the dim darkness of the cave's mouth, he could see the slight movement of a blurred figure, the momentary glint of the sun on a rifle barrel.

Somehow, Mannix forced a grin onto his taut features and with hands the dark mouth of the cave. When he was still a few yards away, Kirk Burnham ordered: "Stand! Mebbe you're all right and mebbe you're not. You're the young galoot was about to tear into Rupe Calligy, last night when we busted things up at the Gold Ring. That's a point in your favor. What do you want? Did you say your name was Mannix? Has a familiar ring."

Swiftly Ed told the tall, skinny outlaw guard about the Mannixes and what happened to them in Hell's Acres. When he'd finished, Burnham said: "I reckon you've rightly got cause for a grudge agin that sidewinder, Ringold. Mebbe we could use an extra man. A good one. Understand, though, you git no split from this kidnap job. The dirty work's been done on that."

"I wanted no part in it, anyhow," Mannix said. Then for a moment

sweat broke out all over him. He could feel it running down over his ribs and along the groove of his spine. There was a long silence from the cave and Mannix figured he'd said the wrong thing. The slightest thing might turn suspicion against him at this point and he knew that Kirk Burnham wouldn't have the slightest compunction about gunning him down, if necessary. He held his breath.

Then Burnham said: "All right. You just stand for a minute, while I call the others to look you over and see what they think about it. If this is any kind of trick or trap, Gawd help you, mister!"

MANNIX HEARD Burnham's voice, then, muffled and hollow sounding, as he turned and shouted back into the depths of the cave: "Bull, bring the boys out here! We got company!"

Mannix stood there with his hands still upraised, his arms beginning to ache a little. His ears felt as though they were quivering, so hard was he listening for the turning of a stone or the falling of a piece of loosened rock, over to the right, where he knew Ringold and Calligy were hiding, watching. That would be all he'd need. Burnham and the others would know what was up, immediately.

Then he saw the figure in the mouth of the cave move and Kirk Burnham's long, stooped, cadaverous figure came out into the sunlight, a rifle crooked at-ready under his arm. Right behind him were Bull Patterson and the other two owlhooters. They all stared curioulsy at Mannix as they walked slowly toward him, spread out, so that they could come at him from all sides if he made a wrong move.

Mannix waited until they were all well out from under the protecting overhang of cliff and was just about to wriggle his fingers in the prearranged signal to Ringold and Calligy, when the pair beat him to it.

The sound of the shot beat its way back and forth between the walls of the canyon, its echo ringing, slamming at the eardrums again and again. Then there was the whine of the slug. And one of the men with Burnham and Patterson slowly let the rifle he was carrying, slip from under his arm. It fell to the ledge in front of the cliff. The man half turned, a surprised, stupid expression on his bearded face. His hand clawed at his chest and came away red. He went down in sections, like a puppet with the strings suddenly cut, never knowing what had happened to him.

Another shot followed and its echo joined in with the first, in a continuous clamor of sound. But this one missed, because Burnham, Patterson and the third man had jumped in alarm at the sound of the first shot. The second bullet ricocheted off a rock and went whining and singing out across the canyon.

"He's led us out here into a trap!" Kirk Burnham screamed and wheeled from the direction of the shots, toward Ed Mannix, squeezing trigger on his own rifle. But Mannix was no longer in the same spot. While Bull Patterson and the other man were thundering their own rifle fire up toward the roost of Ringold and Calligy, Mannix charged, bent double toward Kirk Burnham's scrawney figure. A slug riffled through his hair and he felt the heat of it. Then he crashed against Burnham's long, stringy legs, under the raised rifle. Burnham went crashing backward, full length, against the rock floor of the ledge.

Mannix scrambled on top of him, reached for the outlaw's throat but then he saw the way Burnham's lantern jaw sagged open and the way his eyes were rolled back into his head. Burnham would not give him any more trouble. He'd cracked his head against the rock, was out cold.

Swiftly, he reached for Burnham's rifle and scrounged around, expecting bullets to come whistling at him from the rifle's of Burnham's confederates. But while he had been grappling with Burnham, Ringold and Calligy had made good with two more shots. Bull Patterson was sprawled

full length on his face, blood leaking from a bullet hole in his temple. The fourth man was spinning around on his toes like a dancer, his rifle flying from his suddenly stiffened fingers and hurtling out over the edge of the cliff. Then he walked stiff-legged, pain-blinded toward the edge of the precipice and off of it in a six hundred foot drop to the floor of the canyon below.

Widly, Mannix waved his arms and shouted for Ringold and Calligy to cease firing. Then he made for the black, slot-like entrance to the cave. There was a narrow, low-ceilinged tunnel, along which Mannix had to stoop and then he suddenly came out into a large, flare-lit cavern. A bat swooped around his head for a moment as he moved toward a pile of supplies, stacked up at the far end of the cave. Roped by her wrists to an iron rung embedded in the wall of the cave, was Marcia Ringold.

She looked to be unhurt, he saw, except that her long red gown was ripped in several places and there were scratches and a bruise on her cheek. Her hair, too, had come down out of its high pompadour and hung loosely, now, about her shoulders like a cascade of gleaming molten copper. Her enormous green eyes were wide with fright as she looked toward Mannix and then she recognized him and some of the tightness went from her features. She began to cry and laugh at the same time.

Mannix calmed her down and explained what had happened, while he worked to untie her carefully knotted wrists. Then he rubbed her hands to get the circulation back in them. When he'd finished, he added, bitterly: "So you're free now. In a few minutes your gallant husband will be here to take you back home."

She looked hurt for an instant, then she said: "Ed, what was the message from Len?" Her voice was full of tenderness.

4

HE TOLD her, swiftly, watching the play of emotions across her cameo-like features. Near the end of the story, Marcia suddenly reached out and caught hold of his hands. Her lips pulled back in fear. "Ed, Ed!" she cried. "You believed that—you took Jackson Ringold's word that he would let me go and get Len's little girl and that we bring her up as our own?"

He nodded and she said: "Oh, Ed, you fool! Don't you know Jackson Ringold's word means nothing to him. He'd double-cross his own father! He'd have agreed to anything you suggested, knowing he didn't intend to keep his word. He won't do what he proimised, Ed. My husband hates children. He...." Suddenly she broke off and grew pale. "Ed!"

"What is is, Marcia?"

"Ed," she said, staring at him, wild-eyed. "You'd better get away from here. You're in danger, Ed. Ringold and Calligy both hate the sight of a Mannix. Now that you've helped them out and they don't need you anymore, they'll kill you, Ed!"

His mouth pulled into a grim, straight line. He reached out and took hold of her shoulders, shook her a little. "So you know what kind of a rat your husband is, and still you married him. I'd thought maybe you were just dumb and didn't understand what a dirty, conniving coyote he was. Or I thought maybe you were so blamed in love with him, you were blind to his faults or didn't care about them. But..."

"I—I'm not, Ed," she interrupted. "I never loved Jackson Ringold. You've got to understand, Ed Mannix. I never knew until after I married him, that he was responsible for the death of my own dad and for all the Mannixes, Ed. After Dad died, Ringold was nice to me. He gave me a job, singing in his cafe. I was very young and lonesome and scared. When he finally asked me to marry

him, I didn't know any better. Even though I knew I didn't really love him, I thought maybe I would grow to and that the marriage would work out for the best."

She broke off suddenly, a little sob in her throat. Then she went on; "I soon found out what a mistake I'd made. We weren't married very long before Ringold showed his true colors. He made me continue to work in the saloon; taunted me with the story of how he'd killed my father. Several times I've tried to run away from him, Ed. But he always has that ape, Calligy watching me, guarding me. I finally gave it up."

Suddenly there was the sound of footsteps coming along the tunnel entrance to the cavern. Mannix put a finger to his lips, said: "Shh! Here they come!"

JACKSON RINGOLD and Rupe Calligy came into the light of the flares inside the cave, then, their rifles crooked in their arms. They walked straight over to Mannix and Marcia. Ringold made a stiff, mocking bow to his wife, his face white with temper, his amber colored eyes cold and shiny as bottle-glass.

"That was a very touching little story you told our friend, Mannix, here," he said, softly. "You should have spoken a little more quietly. Voices carry, here in the cave, my dear. We heard every word you said, didn't we, Rupe?"

The big man couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from Marcia. He kept staring at the burnished copper loveliness of her hair and moistening his thick lips with his tongue. "Yeah," he said, absently. "Sure, Mr. Ringold." His face began to work, the ugly features distorting, as though he was pondering some great problem, too much for his small brain.

Ringold stepped away from Calligy and brought up his rifle with the barrel pointed straight at Mannix's chest. "And now that our friend, here, has served his purpose to us, I think it's time to complete the demise of the Mannix clan. The Mannixes stood for all that I've always hated, mister. You're just like the rest of them." To Marcia, he said: "As for you, my dear, in punishment for shooting your miserable little mouth off before a stranger, you shall watch the execution. Watch closely, Marcia, what happens to the brave and honorable of the world. The fools, the men with scruples and codes to live by!"

Ed Mannix watched Ringold's finger whiten on the trigger of the rifle. He felt his stomach seem to shrivel and knot-up. More with anger than with fear, though. Anger at being tricked, double-crossed and taken for a fool by a man like Ringold, for not having enough savvy not to trust a poison-tongued sidewinder. At the same time, he taunted all his muscles and his nerve ends seemed to scream with strain. He got set to leap at Ringold. It was a loco notion and he knew he couldn't make it. But it wasn't in him to stand there and get shot down without resisting, like a cornered animal.

But just before Ringold's finger fully tightened around the rifle trigger, before Mannix made his leap into the face of death, he saw Rupe Calligy, suddenly circle around in back of Jackson Ringold. Ringold abruptly stiffened and a look of surprise and horror slipped over his suave features as Calligy pushed his muzzle into Ringold's back.

Calligy's rough voice said: "Drop that rifle, Ringold. *I'm* going to have the pleasure of killing this Mannix." As Ringold's rifle clattered to the floor of the cave, Calligy went on: "And the pleasure of killing you, too, Mister. You've bossed me around long enough. I've been waiting a long time for a chance to get rid of you, without any suspicion being thrown onto me. We'll tell it back in town that both you and young Mannix got shot by the Kirk Burnham boys before I finally got them. I'm going to take over the town you've tamed so nicely, Ringold. And that pretty redheaded wife of yours will be free again. Mebbe she'll be so grateful to me for gettin' rid of you, Ringold, she'll learn to care for me a little bit. She sure couldn't hate me no

worsen' she does you!"

"No, Rupe, no!" Marcia cried in protest. "Don't kill him. Please. For my sake!"

"Don't be a fool, Calligy!" Ringold said, quickly. His voice was trembling. He gave a nervous little laugh. "Maybe you're just hoorawing me, Rupe, eh? Is that it. You wouldn't really shoot down your old pard in cold blood, would you Rupe? Listen, maybe I haven't realized your full value to me. Suppose—suppose if we forget about this little scene, when we get back to town, I make you a full pardner to all my holdings. We..."

"Cut it, Ringold," Calligy said, tightly. "I've heard your lyin' tongue before; it don't impress me none. This is one tight you don't spiel your way out of. So long, Ringold!"

RINGOLD squealed with fright, his eyes rolling widly; sweat rivuletted down his full, handsome features. He gibbered: "No, no, no, Rupe! You can't do this! You wouldn't dare, Rupe. I'll..."

"Wouldn't I?" Calligy asked, almost gently.

There was the muffled clap of a rifle shot. Jackson Ringold went up onto his toes, his whole body stiffening, his back arching jerkily against the full impact of the close-up shot. He made a gurgling sound in his throat and collapsed at Rupe Calligy's feet.

Calligy stepped back, his eyes flicking from Mannix to Marcia, who stood frozen with shock, her hand pressed tightly to her mouth, holding back a scream. Suddenly all the color went out of her face and her legs gave way. She toppled to the floor in a dead faint.

"It's just as well she keeled over," Calligy said, chuckling. "It wouldn't be nice for a lady to see this," Abrutly, he flung the rifle away from him, moved in a crouch toward Ed Mannix, his long, gorilla-like arms reaching. "Last night, Mannix, in the Gold Ring, you put on a tough hombre act. Now let's see how tough you really are. Mannix, I'm going to tear you apart with my bare hands. I'm going to pop your eyes out like grapes, with my thumbs. I'm going to yank your arms out if their sockets. I'm going to throttle you until your tongue hangs out of your head like a slab of uncooked beef!"

Mannix tensed himself and circled warily away from the big man. In the ghostly glare from the pineknot torches stuck into the walls of the caves, Calligy's shadow loomed across the floor as huge as some prehistoric monster. Calligy looked mountain-big and the mad kill-glitter in his eyes made cold studs of sweat break out all over Mannix's body.

Calligy crooked a mammoth forefinger, teasingly. He knuckled his curly blonde head with his other hand. "C'mere, son!" he called, mockingly. "Don't try to get away from old Calligy. C'mere and let me bear-hug the guts out of yuh, to show how much I like yuh!"

Mannix kept backing away and suddenly Calligy lunged like a crazed bull, swinging one arm in a mighty roundhouse blow. Mannix danced to one side and escaped the full force of the sledge-hammer blow. But it still caught him a glancing wallop across the cheekbone, took skin and beard stubble with it, almost knocked Mannix's head from his shoulders. Mannix rocked on his feet and shook his head, groggily.

His vision cleared just as Calligy wheeled and lumbered back toward him. He ducked inside of Calligy's next blow and swung with all his weight at the big man's jutting jaw. He didn't use his balled fist. He used the heel of his hand and the blow landed squarely. But Calligy just grunted and shook himself like a great wounded grizzly and came at Mannix again.

This time, instead of swinging his fist at Mannix, Calligy bored in close, aimed a vicious kick of his boot at Mannix's kneecap, intending to smash it and cripple him. At the last moment, Mannix twisted his leg just in time and took the blow on the inside of the thigh, instead. It numbed the leg but he knew the damage was only temporary.

HE STARTED to back away again and carefully watched the giant coming at him once more. Calligy had grown a little careless, now, though. He came on too fast, with his arms hanging loose and ape-like at his sides. Abruptly, Mannix dug in his toes, stopped and instead of retreating, rushed headlong at the larger man, doubled over. He felt his head ram solidly into Calligy's great belly. He heard the breath *whoosh* out of his opponents chest in great gusts. He straightened and saw that Calligy was doubled over slightly holding his guts. Any other man would have been flat on his back.

Mannix cut loose with two swings, a left and a right, bringing his hands up from the floor, the hard heels of them, landing with all his power against the big man's jaw on one side, his eye on the other.

Calligy let out a tremendous bellow of pain and rage, staggered sideways, hurt for the first time. With a little cry of triumph, Mannix tore in after him, hoping to deliver the finishing blows of the fight. But he was over-anxious. He misjudged the damage done to Calligy. As he moved in close, Calligy suddenly reached out and gripped him under the armpits. He lifted Mannix, kicking and flailing his legs, high above his head and threw him, bodily across the cave.

Mannix landed against the rocky wall and slid down it, limply. The glare of the trorches went on and off in his eyes. His body ached and pain ripped at his middle. He felt as though every bone in him was crushed. He lay there, gathering his strength, his breath tearing at his lungs.

He heard the pound of Calligy's footsteps coming toward him and rolled over just in time to see the big man's tremendous bulk come diving toward him. Once Calligy got him down like this, on top of him, Mannix knew, he was through. Calligy would kill him as he'd promised, inch by painful inch. In a wild burst of desperation, Mannix got to his feet up and doubled his legs back against his belly. He shot them out again as Calligy lunged down at him. The heels of his boots caught Calligy flush in the face and he tumbled sideways, roaring with pain, to the floor.

Mannix scrambled to his feet, advanced toward Calligy, who was dazedly getting to his knees, now, his face a blood-oozing, swollen mess. Calligy tried to grab at his legs but he was too slow. Mannix side-stepped and swung the side of his hand hard against the side of Calligy's neck, in a knife-edge blow. The big man's monstrous head lolled and his eyes walled back. He screamed curses at Mannix and somehow staggered to his feet again.

Mannix stood for a moment, gathering his strength, trying to catch his breath, wiping some of the blood from head cuts, out of his own eyes. He was surprised, now, to see that Calligy was moving away from him and toward the dead figure of Jackson Ringold. Too late, Mannix realized that Calligy had given up the idea of trying to beat him to death with his fists. He was going to make a sure thing of it, now.

CALLIGY stooped over Ringold's body and tugged the deadman's silver mounted pistol from its holster. Mannix rushed at him, weaving. The sound of the pistol crashed loudly against the ceiling of the cave and Mannix felt the burn and sting of hot lead against his shoulder. The warm thickness of blood ran down his arm.

He reached the big man before he could fire another shot but Calligy clubbed at him with the pistol. Mannix took the blows across the back and shoulder and got up under Calligy's long arms. He jabbed the stiffened tips of his fingers in a short, vicious blow into Calligy's windpipe.

Calligy fell back, gagging, weak-kneed. The silver pistol fell from his numbed fingers. In a dark red rage

that was the culmination of all the wrongs that had been done against himand his family by men of this breed, Mannix whipped after him. He slammed blow after blow into Calligy's face, driving the big man back against the wall of the cave.

Mannix only stopped when there was no more strength to lift up his arms, when there was no more breath in his chest and his legs would hardly hold him. He saw then that Rupe Caligy had been unconscious for a long time and that only the wall of the cave had been holding him upright. Mannix stepped out of the way as Calligy's mammoth body toppled stiffly forward, fell face-down like a felled ox, to the floor.

Ed Mannix stood for a long moment, gasping, shaking himself all over, like a lean tough wolf-hound after a wilderness battle to the death with another animal. Then slowly, spraddle-legged, he walked over and sat down on a box of supplies, his head in his hands. The next thing he knew, he felt a gentle hand on his head. He looked up and it was Marcia.

She was standing over him and there was the look on her face of pride and concern and pity for his hurts, that he remembered seeing on the face of his mother when he was a kid and came in from a schoolyard fight, battered and torn.

"Poor Ed," Marcia said softly. Then she began to rip strips of cloth from the bottom of her gown and used them to make rough dressings for his wounds. Her hands felt cool and soft to his fevered skin and he couldn't keep his eyes off of her. When she was finished with the dressings and he had recovered enough strength, they left the cave together. They climbed down the cliff trail and walked to the horses.

On the long ride back to Hell's Acres, Mannix tried not to, but he couldn't help thinking and wondering, if maybe, after a reasonable length of time, he and Marcia—well, hell, if Marcia was going to bring up Len's little girl, the kid would need a father to look out for it, wouldn't she? And who knows, maybe later, he thought, it would be a good idea for the younker to have some other young'ns to keep her company.

Thinking that and looking from the corners of his eyes at Marcia, riding beside him, and catching her cutting her glance at him, too, occasionally, Mannix somehow didn't seem to mind the jogging of his bruised and aching body. And when, finally, Marcia brought her horse close and reached out and took his hand in hers, he found out that there was suddenly no more pain in him at all. He just felt as though he was floating through the air and he didn't hardly care if they never got back to Hell's Acres.

A Powerful New Book-Length Novel

Lonesome Trail

by CLIFF CAMPBELL

appears complete in the November issue of

BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

Pandemonium busts loose when my dawg runs that razorback into the picnic.

Dear Trouble

By Joe Austell Small

(Author of "Booger of Hell Valley," "Prince of the Circle K" etc.)

Another rip-roaring story of rangeland humor!

TWENTY YEARS of looking cattle in the rump has taught me a good deal about animals and people. But there's two critters man'll never figure out: one's a woman; the other's a cantankerous buck deer. I know, because I've had experience with both.

How come I have experience with a woman—a critter I hadn't gone further than spoken to in my thirty-four years of living—is this wild hog business over on Panther Branch.

We have a day-preaching over there once a year and near'bout all the country turns out. Seems funny going to meet at eight- o'clock in the morning, and listening to the old black-jack swags ring with the good word by nine-thirty. But that's the way the all-day preachings go and everybody enjoys it a right smart. There's one sermon in the morning, a singing, and then we spread dinner. The woman folks bring their table cloths and lay them flat out on the pack sand and lay out the plague-gondest bunch of grub all over the pretty white cloth that a man ever dreamed of on his hungriest night.

We all eat until we're miserable, then find a spot clear of sand nettles and nap awhile underneath the shade of an old hickory nut grove. There's another preaching at three o'clock, games, cold drinks and ice cream un-

til six, another dinner on the ground, and then comes the night rounding up of the gospel. It's a full day and folks feel a heap cleaner in their hearts and fuller in their stomachs when they hitch up old Beck and Kate to the wagon and roll out for home.

I'm enjoying this one a heap until that wild hog business comes up. It's in the middle of the morning sermon when that Bradhead dog of mine jumps that razorback in the yaupon flats of old Bucktooth Gasper's pasture. That old potlicker lets out a yowl that might-nigh exhausts him from the start. The preacher's a sin-buster from way back. He's relating the good word long and loud and coming down with his fist hard on the old knotty pine pulpit. His word rings against the black-jack trees and bounces a dim echo off Red-oak Cliff on the creek bank. A crow caws in the far bottom and an old cow lowes from the deep woods.

But none of these sounds bother me like that one lonesome yowl of old Bradhead's. I know how that stubborn old hound is when he jumps something in the brush. He'll get the best of a varmint or stay with it all day, and I know them old razorbacks that Bucktooth have let run wild going on three years now won't be very easy to get the best of. Folks'll look at me and think as how it's pretty sinful for a man to sit there quiet like, soaking up a batch of the good word while his hound's out disturbing the meeting by chasing a wild hog on the Sabbath. I'm gonna have to break that dog of running hogs one of these days.

BUT I'M NOT as mindful of what folks will say as what this Donna Rice girl'll think. She's sat down beside me sort of accidental since there's no more seats open near her ma and pa except the one next to me. I've knowed her pa a long time and I ask the dainty little filly how her pa's cattle are, just to be polite. She answers a heap longer than is necessary to tell the bare facts, so we strike up a conversation while the preacher's looking somewhere else. Before the sermon's half way over I work up enough gall to ask the little thing if I can see her home and she says yes without hardly thinking. I'm sure surprised at myself by now and start thinking that maybe I'm a born woman-killer from 'way back and just never knowed it on account of I never was very close to one before. I'm liking this one a heap already.

When the sermon's through and the women folks start spreading chicken dressing, sweet potatoes, pies and cakes on the ground, I nearly forget about old Bradhead and his hog. He's been trailing the critter all morning and his mournful old voice sifts through the briar tangles and thickets off and on to let us know he ain't lost heart yet. It's not until we sit down to eat that I really got worried about my dog.

Folks have been glancing at me now and then through the sermon. Everybody in the country knows the voice of my Bradhead dog. It plagues me a right smart for this thing to happen right when I've met up with a girl like Donna, but there's not a heap I can do about it under the circumstances. I could have rode out and whupped his tail with the knot end of a rope after the sermon was over, but more'n like, I'd missed the eats trying to run that old dog down.

Nubbin-head Telk, that's my friend from the Walking J, looks at me once in awhile and smiles devilish like.

ALONG ABOUT the time that first serving of chicken's wiped clean from our plates is when the play busts loose. Old Bradhead's got his dander up over this hog not showing proper fear of him and he starts working on the critter pretty heavy. It ain't long before he's got that razorback stretched out across the woods in fair race style. There's a couple of wolf hunters there and they aggravate the situation some by hollering encouragement at that old hound.

When that hog busts a hole in the brush and tears out across the clearing, I know the jig's up.

"You, Bradhead!" I holler as the

old dog appears, hot on the hog's heels. But my varmint hound, he don't hear me.

Tony Gasper's mules are not particular taken with hog races, so when that razorback starts toward them, the team rears up on their hind legs, whinneys and rattles their gear right sharply. This boogers the hog and turns him into a group of saddle horses. He's under their feet before the hog knows what is happening, and they cut up a good bit. One kicks that old razorback a little and maybe dazes him some. Leastways, I don't believe a hog in his right mind would a-done what that one pulls next.

Old Bradhead's caught up with his victim now and is biting that hog a little on the rump. The razorback's running blind, squealing and threatening at the same time. He's scared, dazed, half mad and discouraged with life, looks like, so I guess that old boar don't let a particular course of travel unduly bother his mind right now.

I'm not much more than on my feet and running toward the ruckus when that old hog heads our way going fast. My heart turns icy all of a sudden and a feeling like cold creek pebbles dropping into my stomach makes my skin pop out like a shriveled lemon..

The least I can do is try to head the hog, so I stand my ground in front of the long line of grub and eating folks and yell "Suey!" pretty loud. I grab my hat and bat it at the old fool's head, too.

But it don't stop him. That hog is headed for yonder ridge and he aims to get there fast. The old boar runs runs through my legs like I'm not even in his way and next thing I know, I'm facing that critter's bobbing rump, riding the hog backwards down the middle of all that good food.

I haven't planned the play like this, of course, and it plagues me a right smart to notice that old Bradhead's forgot his manner sand is following right behind us across the thick layers of pudding, chicken dumpling, and blackberry pie.

A couple of women scream and somebody cusses a little as the lighter type food splashes some. I get a blurred vision of folks falling back like a standing line of thumped dominoes. The women throw up their hands to keep stuff out of their faces, and the men say things and kick out at the hog and dog as they pass. A couple of sharp boot heels dig into my left leg, but I don't pay much attention to this on account of I got worse things to worry about.

Doug Sanders' barbed wire fence catches me—he's the gent who married that Woverington girl from Sandy Grove—and I hang there by my Sunday clothes after the hog's gone under that bottom strand. Bradhead leaves a fist full of hair on the fence as he busts through, yowling like he's got a bear by the tail. I kick at the old hound but it don't do much good. He and that boogered hog melt into the heavy brush like a spray of smoke in a whirl wind.

I'M SORT of put out by the whole deal. My clothes are torn, steak gravy's splattered across my face, creamed Irish potatoes splatter my good clothes, and a square of comb honey's somehow got down my collar. I'll always believe somebody throwed that honey. Maybe a kid, I dunno.

The barbs are biting into my hide as I swing and I'm pretty miserable altogether. I'm not a very heroic looking hunk of man hanging there from that wire fence I know, and it hurts my pride to think about how Donna must be shaping up the picture by now.

"Dad-burned old scallawag!" I holler, resentful like. I shake my fist in the direction the hog and dog have taken and make to get down from that fence.

But I'm stuck. Nubbin-head has to pry me loose, and by the time I'm free, Donna's there to ask if I'm hurt. I don't look very neat standing there before the little woman and I feel kind of out of place.

"Not that I know of, marm," I say. Then I start for my horse. "I've got to round up my dog," I tell Donna.

Nubbin-head Telk has won the draw

Fact is, I didn't have the heart to face the meeting folks after that. My clothes wouldn't stood a gathering like that either. So I bog my spurs and head for the brush, feeling low, hurting in fourteen places and sort of mad to boot. I've always said, the dad-blamedest things can happen to a man like me without half way trying...

WELL, IT DON'T take an unduly smart man to see that "Nubbin-head can take you home." on me that round. It's three days before I speak to that old hound of mine, but I notice the sad look in his eyes and finally I forgive him. Does make me feel a little low, howsomever, when I hear that Hubbin-head's Toadstool nag is stamping out a hole in front of old man Rice's yard gate most twice a week. I hate to give up a pretty little filly like that, but I just haven't got the heart to look her in the eye after that day at the preaching.

That's when old lady Fate plays her trump card. I ought to a-known my life the last few days was too quiet. It's just not natural for Jasper Butterworth to live peaceful like.

When the old man tells me to ride over to the Live Oak spread and bring back that young bull he's buying from old Nat Rice, I hesitate.

"Don't reckon I ought to," I say half to myself.

The old man's dander is easy to rouse when he thinks you're back-talking. "You will," he allows, "or I'll bathe your hind end with the knot end of my catch rope!"

So I ride over to the Live Oak after that bull.

Donna Rice steps out on the front gallery, looking fresh and clean in a suit of just-ironed organdy. She smiles sudden and I can see her blue eyes dance even from the front gate. I turn hot about the cheeks.

"Is your papa here?" I ask the girl.

"No," she says deliberate. "He rode over to Bill Dugan's this morning to trade for some shoats. But get down and come in. Maybe I can help you."

"No, I better get on back," I say quick. "I come after that young bull the old man bought from your pa, but if he's not here, reckon I'll just come back tomorrow."

"Oh fiddlesticks!" the fluff of pretty says impatient. "Let me change and I'll ride over to the mesquite Mott pasture and show you where the bull is." She's gone before I have time to say yes or no.

It's one of them days when a man just naturally appreciates being alive. It's cold and the frost lays thick on the blue sage. It sparkles in the morning sunlight like frog eyes against lantern light. Up on the hills, the sun sets fire to autumn-colored oaks and Big Rock Creek makes gurgling, happy little sounds as its cold water rushes over the uneven bottom. I look at Donna. She smiles; I smile back. I'm glad now the old man sent me over to get that bull.

Life sure runs smooth there for awhile. Leastways, until we find that buck. He's hung by his hind legs to the top wires of a brushy swag fence.

"Oh, the poor little deer!" Donna says. It seems like her heart's plumb melted and threatening to run down her cheeks in the form of tears. I feel the hero blood oozing up inside me as I swing off my nag and walk toward that buck.

Then I feel something else. I always said that there's some common sense inside me if I'd just pay attention to it. But it's hard for a man to shy off from a thing like that when a young filly is agging him on.

"It'd be pretty dangerous to mess with that buck," I tell her.

"Oh, well then," she says and there's a shiver to her tone. "Just leave him and I'll have one of the boys over and free the little deer."

This sure'nuf makes my danger rise. The girl's same as saying looks like I haven't sand enough in my craw to do it.

"Guess I got more sand than sense," I say low and start in to turn loose that buck.

THE BUCK'S forefeet are on the ground. By the signs of his struggles, I can tell he's been there an hour or more. It don't happen

often, but in jumping the fence a deer'll sometimes let their hind feet slip under the top strand of wire and over the second strand. When their weight comes down, the animal's hind legs are caught tight in the wrapped wires. They're there for good.

I get to thinking that the girl's right. Left alone, this deer will starve or the wolves'll eat him alive. All of a sudden I feel mighty sorry for the buck and a little ashamed at my backing off from helping him out. A feeling rises in my throat like a knot about to choke off the air. It's the sudden kindness that's welling up within me. I feel like a blamed hero and a benefactor to animal kind.

The buck shakes his antlers at me when I get close. The animal stamps his forefeet and snorts. A trickle of caution flushes against my backbone, but I don't hardly see how a deer, caught as this one is, can do any damage.

I climb the fence, pick up a stout mesquite limb, stick it through the clamped wires and prise the lower strand back in place without hurting the buck too much. The animal kicks free and stands there on trembling hind legs. I climb the fence and start back toward Donna and my nag while sparks of gladness stab me into a tingling, might-nigh bragging hero. I can see the girl smile and I know my deed has pleased her a heap.

The snort is what warns me. I jump aside just in time. The buck lunges past, missing me by the thickness of an oak leaf. Tough, pronged antlers, meant for me, clatter against a humpbacked mesquite.

The infuriated animal wheels for a second attack. But I've already taken the hint and am making for my nag, gathering go at every step.

That's gratitude for you. I saved the fool creature's life and now it seems he's bent on having mine. It's typical Jasper Butterworth luck, that's what it is!

My nag sees me and the buck scarring up the ground in his direction and he wheels with a boogered snort and dashed off. Donna's claybank falls back on his haunches, rolls wild eyes and fights the bit for safety. I'm left there high ahd dry with nothing but a blood-seeking buck deer to look out for my health and happiness. It looks to me like he ain't unduly concerned about my happiness, but he sure aims to do something about my health.

I run 'round and 'round a brush pile, every ounce of spirit I got going into my legs to keep me outside of hooking distance of that buck.

IT SURE IS one hellacious time to step on a rock. I do though, and it rolls. I roll, gathering long-shanked grassburs by the pound with each roll. They cling to my clothing and gouge my tender hide.

But the gouging I'm really concerned about comes when that buck rams my hind end and tried to paw me to pieces with sharp front hoofs.

I get to my all-fours quick, but that buck's too fast for me. Every time I make to get up he hits me in the seat with a force that rattles my teeth and jars my eyeballs. He keeps at this act until I've frog-hopped some fifty steps toward the fence. My reverse end feels like I've backed against a kicking jackass.

When finally I don't have strength enough to rise, I roll over on my back and grab his horns.

And there we are. I won't let go of the buck; he can't let go of me. I can't get away and neither can he. I lay there and stare up at him. The buck glares down at me. Neither one of us are very happy about the whole thing.

Once in awhile the buck surges backward or forward, doing his dangdest to gore me or free hisself. I hold on grimly. He paws my hands and arms until they bleed. I keep my body away from him as much as possible but at that he cuts my clothes to rags. All and all she's a pretty dreary looking proposition.

I'm trying to recollect what that preacher says about offering up a prayer before your light goes out when Nubbin-head Telk rides up. He's my only stumbling block to

Donna's hand, but right now I love this man like a father.

Nubbin-head falls off his nag, drags his gun and pastes that buck a tolerably heavy lick back of his horns with the butt end. The animal falls like a clubbed steer. I pull myself out from under him weakly.

"What you mean, playing with grown deer?" Nubbin-head asks, smiling devilish.

"Paste up your lips," I say. "Let's get out of here before he comes to and finishes the job. Nubbin-head helps me in the saddle and crawls on behind. We find Donna, fighting her horse and trying to come to my aid just outside the clearing. She looks relieved that I ain't burying-dead already. She makes clucking little sounds and shakes her head when she sees the results of my kindness toward the old buck. Nubbin-head smiles.

"I was just riding down to look you up," he enlightens, "when I ran into Jasper here. I gave him a hand."

There's real appreciation in the girl's eyes when she looks at Nubbin-head and says:

"You don't know how I thank you! You saved his life. Why, Nubbin-head—you're wonderful!"

My heart sinks to toenail level about now. My usta-be pal has done run under me I know. Every time he's the hero and I'm the bloomin' idiot that tackles something he can't finish. No girl in her right mind would get in the same loop with a gent that luck shies away from like water rolling off a goose's back.

I drop my eyes and sigh soulful.

"Ride over to Sandbur and get the doctor," Donna says to Nubbin-head. "I'll take Jasper to my house. I want to see that he gets the best of care. We can't take any chances. He's the kindest, grandest—" she breaks off and makes to blush.

I look up sudden and she's staring me straight in the eyes. There's a light there that even a sleeping idiot could recognize. I've done roped myself a woman and I know it. That red blood on my ragged clothes can't hold a light to the color my face gets about now.

I slide from Nubbin-head's nag over to the girl's mount. My pal sits there for a little while. His face looks like he's just smelled a hunk of overripe limburger cheese. The man's right dejected you can tell.

"But don't you want me to—" he starts in.

"Go on after the doc, Nubbin-head," I say and groan low. "I'm feeling worse every minute."

"Yes, hurry," the girl instructs and turns to me. "You poor dear," she says. Just like that.

Nubbin-head looks at me. I grin at him devilish like. He bogs his spurs and rides off toward town.

I always say, there's two critters man'll never figure out. One's a woman. The other's a cantankerous buck deer. I know, because I've had experience with both....

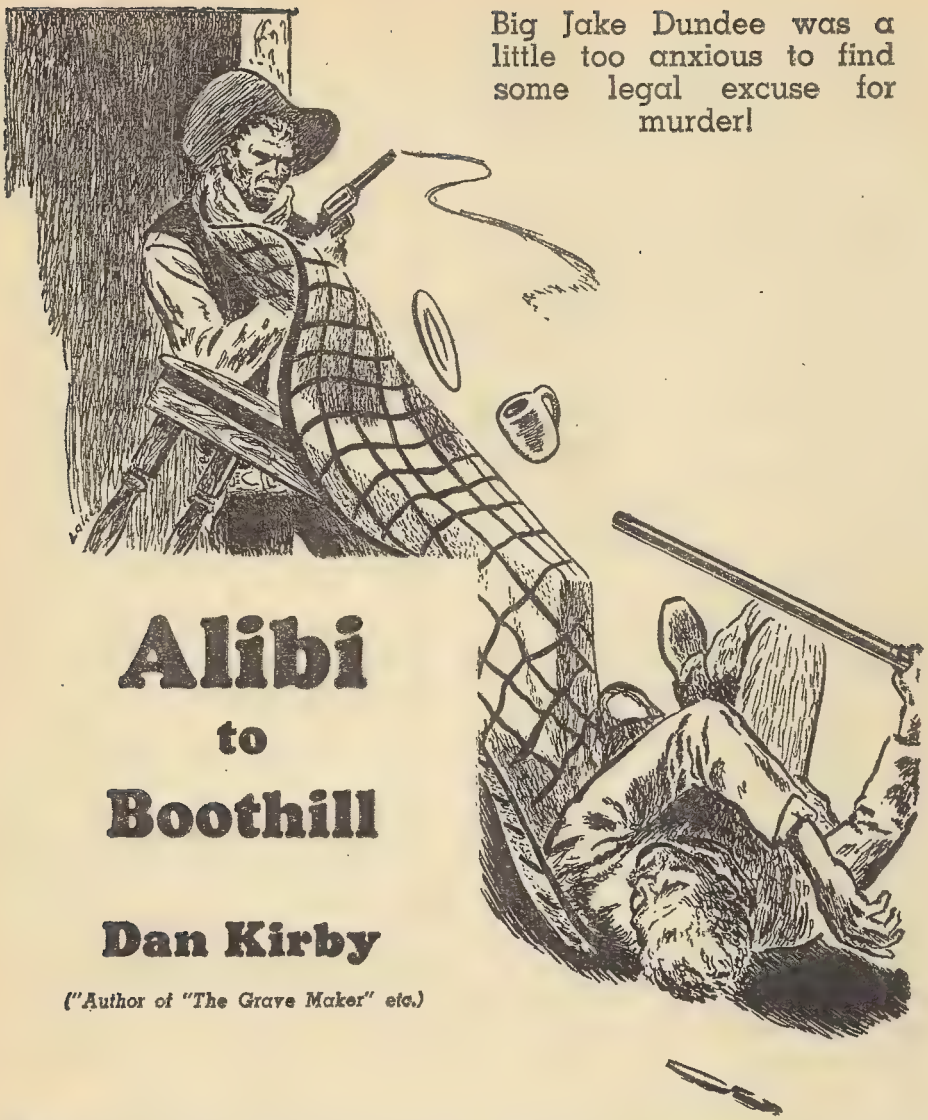
An Action-Packed Book-Length Novel

Six Guns For Hire

by CHUCK STANLEY

appears complete in the November

REAL WESTERN



Big Jake Dundee was a little too anxious to find some legal excuse for murder!

Alibi to Boothill

Dan Kirby

("Author of "The Grave Maker" etc.)

BIG JAKE DUNDEE leaned against the doorjamb of his two room cabin and watched the old roan cow making its third trip of the morning down to the moss green water of Flint Creek. The cow dropped its nose deep into the water, took a long pull, then backed away shaking its head and snorting loudly.

Something akin to a grin broadened Jake's coarse, weather-cracked lips. The cow hadn't yet figured out just what was wrong with that water, but Jake already had the answer. Salt. That creek was saltier than a slab of home-cured sow belly. By dark his whole herd of twenty-odd poorly bred cattle would likely be stumbling and bawling around the creek bank. But Jake wasn't thinking of that now.

He was thinking that at last he had a good excuse to kill old Rusty Welch and the thought sent a queer tingle of anticipation through his stocky body.

Jake's eyes took on a cunning look as he switched his gaze from the creek to the top of the wooden derrick towering behind the cottonwoods a quarter mile up the stream. That

derrick was on Jake's land and the oil well under it was making over twenty barrels of crude per day. The trouble was that Jake's royalty amounted to only a meager one-eighth of that twenty barrels. Old Rusty Welch was pocketing the balance. But come tomorrow Jake would be sitting over there on the location tending the well and he'd be collecting for all that oil. He could do that because by tomorrow, in fact within the next hour or so, Old Rusty would be dead.

Jake turned and went back inside the cabin to pick a holstered forty-five off the peg on the wall. He strapped it low on his thigh and loosened the gun in its leather. Then he left the cabin and took off up the creek toward the well.

It had been nearly two years ago he recalled that Rusty Welch had cornered him in the Wagon Wheel Saloon and offered him five hundred dollars for an oil lease on his land. Jake had figured then that the five hundred was the easiest money he'd ever make. None of the big oil companies had ever been interested in leasing Jake's land, but Rusty was an old driller and he claimed he could smell oil.

Jake had spent the money and laughed at the oldster until the day Rusty brought in the well. It wasn't a big well, but it grossed around thirty dollars per day. After that Jake spent his evenings trying to figure a way to get that lease back. The only answer he figured was to get rid of Rusty. The lease wasn't drawn to extend to Rusty's heirs a lawyer had said; when Rusty died Jake could take over.

IT WAS then that he'd hit on the idea of killing the old man. The hitch was that Sheriff Waldo Webb had a rep for tracking down killers and Jake knew he couldn't outsmart the lawman. But if he could get a good excuse to kill old Rusty, one that would hold up in court, he wouldn't have to worry. And now he figured the old driller had given him that excuse.

Jake pushed out of the brush choked trail into the clearing where the derrick stood. Last time he'd been up here he had jumped Rusty about digging so many salt water pits around the well. Rusty had offered to pay for the damage to the land, but Jake had held out for an underground salt water disposal system. He knew of course that the expense of such a system was far too great for the oldster to meet, but he figured then he might break Rusty. He hadn't figured on the oldster getting mad and dumping the salt water in the creek. But it was working out better than he'd figured. There was a law against polluting running streams with salt water from oil wells.

Rusty Welch was just sitting down to the breakfast table when Jake barged into the flimsy cabin that stood near the well. A surprised look flashed over the old driller's leathery face and he rose hastily. "What's the idee, Dundee, bustin' into a man's house—"

He broke off as Jake's big hand lashed out and sent him sprawling across the room. "Figgered yuh were pretty sharp, eh, old man?" Jake's face was flushed and his pale eyes were bright with killer lust. "Thought yuh could get back at me by turnin' that salt water into my creek." His hand dropped to the gun on his thigh.

The oldster's face paled. He rubbed a shaky hand across his jaw and tried to ease toward the door. "Blast yuh, Dundee, you knowed I couldn't afford to install no underground disposal layout, but I—"

He broke off as Jake's hand came up with the forty-five. He looked at the thin smile on Jake's lips, saw the cold hell mirrored in the big man's eyes. then made a desperate leap for the scattergun propped in a corner by the door. His hands had just closed over the big gun and he was whirling around when Jake pulled the trigger.

Jake saw the oldster buckle as the heavy slug took him square in the middle, saw the color ebb out of the old man's winter-killed face, then Jake holstered his gun and stepped out of the cabin.

He had it all planned out what he'd tell Sheriff Webb when he rode in to

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Digger John's Trick

By A. A. Baker

(Author of "Digger John's Firebug," "Digger John's Adobe" etc.)

Digger John figured that he and his cronies were far from being ready to sprout halos — but that didn't stop him from getting indignant about other hombres who were still farther!

WINTER ON the Donner Summit usually slips in quietly. The clouds gather and lay around for a few days as they look over the lay of the land. The wind howls softly at first as a warning for animals to get out of the higher places and for trees to dig their roots deeper in the rocky soil; but this is only a warning and both wind and clouds may flit away, leaving Indian Summer weather that deludes the miner in the deep canyons. He lingers when he should be cleaning his sluice box, strengthening his cabin against snowfall and packing his kit prior to hightailing it plumb out of the canyons.

Many of the miners spend the winter in Sacramento and Marysville, while others travel down to the gallant city of San Francisco, leaving but a skeleton crew in the high Sierras to protect against the winters fury.

The winter of 1862 was different. It slipped in but forgot to flit away. The miners went to bed one summer night and awoke the next morning,

to find winter. The clouds had backed up and let down enough snow to bury anything that wasn't three feet tall.

Digger John was out hunting a pocket and stumbled into town with the toes frozen on his left foot. He dipped his tin cup several times into the whiskey barrel in Dredger's Bar. The heat from the red-eye penetrated to his toes as he told the group huddled around the stove how he got his foot froze.

"I'd worked my way up Canyon Creek by nightfall and after chawin' on some dry biscuits, I climbed into an old tunnel thet'd been dug out a couple years ago, didn't make no fire 'cause it was so warm, then woke up in the dark smellin' the powerful odor of a bear squirmin' around in the same tunnel. Thet was enough! I wasn't gonna sleep with no hibernatin' bear but, when I stuck my haid outa the entrance, there was two feet of snow fallen and more comin' down. The bear settled down, so I decided to set by the entrance 'til mornin'. I musta dozed because it was light when I felt somethin' wrigglin' around inside my boot. I looked down and there was a rattler's tail stickin' outa the top!" Digger dipped his cup into the whiskey barrel again before he continued.

"Folks, I was in a very bad position. I thought of shootin' into my boot but thet would be painful, besides, it would wake up the bear, also the family of skunks thet had moved into another corner of the mine entrance. If I grabbed thet snake by the tail he might git in a good bite on the way out! So, long as I left him alone I was safe 'cause all he wanted was to git warm. What'd I do? It took some figurin' but I figured her out. I held out my hat and caught drips of water 'til my hat was about half full. Then, gently trickled it into my boot. The ice water seeped down to my foot and musta froze thet snake 'cause he backed right out! Then I hightailed it fer town!"

The crowd in Dredget Dan's warm bar laughed heartily and Digger split his rugged mouth in a sly grin. He dipped into the whiskey barrel again, poured a little of the liquid down his boot leg, to warm his frozen toe, and remarked: "Yessir, some strange things have happened in these hills!

"Back in fifty-six, Tom Havercamp was caught in the first snow behind Sierra City. He slipped and broke his laig. Well sir, it looked like he was doomed to die on thet frozen, snow packed slope. But John was smart too, he spotted an old pine snag about a hundred feet away and crawled over to it. He set the snag afire and while it was aburnin', set his laig. He'd lost his pack but still had his gold pan. After the snag had burned for several hours, the snow melted around the base of the tree and John noticed a tantalizin' odor thet smelled like broilin' bear meat. He investigated and discovered a bear had been asleep in thet old, dead tree and the fire had cooked him up proper. Tom laid up there on the mountain, full of bear meat, aburnin' the snags, for six weeks 'til his laig healed. To kill the time, he panned the dirt, 'round about thet he could reach, in the melted snow water. Well sir," Digger's tincup made another dip, "when Tim walked into Sierra City, he weight ten pounds heavier with the gold he'd panned on thet mountain side!"

ALL THAT bitter winter day the prospectors struggled into the mountain town. Three feet of snow had fallen during the night and more was floating down. Canyons were unsafe and the miners were drawn and tired of the hard work necessary to dig gold; they looked forward eagerly to a winter spent in the warmer valleys. The storm brought mishaps and rescue parties were dispatched through the mountains until everyone was accounted for. The few who were to see the winter through, in the town of old Run, settled down in Dredger's bar to the peaceful pursuit of drinking and bucking Slim Deakin's faro table.

Late in the winter, the time dragged heavy and Slim shut down his game and drifted down to San Francisco. He wasn't gone two weeks before he returned and with him came

a young girl. Slim gathered Digger John from under the faro table, where he was sleeping with a bottle for a pillow, carried the big man outside, broke the ice in the water trough and, when he was through, the Digger was sober. Slim then went upstairs and uncovered Dredger Dan from eight goose-down blankets, held his clothes so the shivering bar owner could get his pants on and dragged Dredger downstairs.

As Dredger and John stood beside the whiskey barrel the girl was introduced by Slim. "This is Lottie Barnes. She needs help, so I brought her here. You can listen to her story and then we can decide how to assist this little lady in her distress." The gambler preened his flowered waistcoat and smiled gallantly toward Miss Barnes. He aimed a finger. "This one is Dredger Dan Murphy, the owner of this hostel and numerous other business ventures in our wild mountain town. Mr. Murphy has the usual ethics of a business man," Dredger beamed as Slim continued, "but I'm sure he can surrender his ethics to assist a lady in distress. Miss Barnes; Mr. Dredger Dan Murphy." Dredger shook her soft hand gently.

"Now, Miss Barnes, might I present Digger John. Just that, Digger John. He has no last name and today we find him exceptionally immaculate because the sweeper must have swept him off while he was sleeping. John is a sniper and has tramped these mountains from Weaverville to the Southern Mines. His unkept appearance is overlooked by those who know him and as he has slept in the same tunnel with a bear, a skunk family and a rattlesnake, I'm sure the desperate villians from San Francisco's dens will not faze or scare the Digger!" Digger smiled and Miss Barnes bowed.

"Now Miss Barnes, tell these men your story because they are the only men I know that can help you."

"MY FATHER, gentlemen, has a mine over beyond the north fork of the American River. It's wild, rugged country and is much farther back in the mountains than the average prospector is willing to go. My father stumbled on the ledge early last spring and, to keep the news from leaking out, he stayed in all year and lived off the country. He worked the ledge and carried the highgrade, rotten quartz that he figures runs as high as ten pounds of gold to the ton, out of the wild country and cached it alongside the Minnesota Hill road. He figures he carried almost five tons of this highgrade to the road. Then, secretly, he hired two freight wagons from Sacramento to haul it in.

"My father," Miss Barnes continued, "is a prudent man and was going to use the profits from the years work to finance a mill so that he could produce on a larger scale the next year. His plan worked until he had the wagon loaded, ready to start, when a sudden storm, one that trapped many men, descended. The teamsters and my father got the horse out but the wagons, and naturally the ore, had to be left. Father covered the wagons, with brush and the snow finished the job of hiding the location. In the spring the wagons and ore could have been brought out and sold to the smelter; but one of the teamsters, on a spree in San Francisco, boasted that he knew where two wagon loads of gold were hidden and you know what that means in Frisco!"

Slim interrupted. "These hill-billies don't know too much about the lower towns, Miss Lottie, so I better bring them up to date." He hooked a shiny bootheel over the lower rung of the pot-bellied stove and addressed Dredger and Digger.

"There's a group of cuthroats and robbers in 'Frisco calling themselves the Hounds. They run the gambling, the dives and the shanghaing that makes it blasted unhealthy for a decent man to mess around too much. They'll roll a man quicker than one of Digger's burro's will kick a stranger." Digger John smiled because he had collected thirty of the meanest pack animals in the Sierras. When the prospectors left the high mountains for the coast they left their burros with Digger because the animals

seemed to feel a kinship with the erratic sniper.

Deakins continued his description. "These Hounds have been sort of subdued by the Vigilantes, so they kind of keep in line around 'Frisco. They're working their skullduggery around the mines now. They pull a fast deal and head back to 'Frisco. That way, they kind of keep in the clear. Ten years ago they would have stretched hemp for the first trick but now they can bribe and finagle themselves into the clear if they get caught. But, go on with your story, Miss Lottie."

Miss Barnes continued. "Somehow, father found out the teamster had let the secret out and looked the man up. They quarreled and Father was foolish enough to quarrel in Irish Mac's bar. He was badly beaten by the gang and now is suffering a broken leg and will be laid up several more weeks. Meanwhile, these cutthroats are bringing an outfit into the mountains to recover the high-grade ore. They plan on being the first ones into the cache as soon as the snow melts enough to get into that back country. I met Mr. Deakins and," she smiled prettily at the gambler, "he is trying to help. He feels that we can, with your assistance, beat the Hounds to the wagons. But I'm afraid these desperados will have about ten men and there are only three of you. I wouldn't want you to go into danger, but Mr. Deakins insisted we should try."

"NEVER YOU mind your pretty head, Miss Lottie." spoke Slim. "We are used to odds in the mines and these two men," he waved a graceful hand toward the frowning saloon keeper and Digger, "are equal to a hundred of your San Francisco Hounds. So, start thinking boys, because we'll need plenty of brains to get ahead of our visitors. This gang followed us clear from 'Frisco and we gave them the slip just a couple hours ago, by taking Williams Turn and missing that slide at Secret Town."

Dredger Dan protested. "Much as I'd like to help the little lady, Slim, I don't see how we kin. They sounded plenty tough and I got my business to think about. Sounds like we'd have to gunfight 'em. I hate to say it but yew better count me out." Dredger turned and started up the stairs just as the door slammed open.

Ten rough men clattered into the bar. They looked at the girl and at Slim, then ignoring Digger, stood close to the bar. One shouted. "Where's the barkeep! We want some liquor!" Before Dredger could get down the stairs, a big red faced men started giving orders. "Fleck, yore a bartender. Git back of that bar and pour some red-eye."

Fleck removed his hat and, in mock solemnity slid around back of the bar, where he politely spread his arms wide, splayed his fingers gently on the polished oak and inquired; "The bar is now open. What'll it be, gents?" The men laughed, gave their orders and Fleck started pouring. The men enjoyed their horseplay for just the few split seconds it took Dredger Dan to tramp up the stairs and return with a double-barrelled shot gun.

His voice roared but you could hear the ominous click of the hammers cock. "Git yore filthy, stinking, hides away from thet bar!" He let go the first barrel and the bottles shook, the shot sprayed against the floor and the noise was deafening. The other hammer clicked and the ten men tried to get through one door at the same time. The second barrel let go as the swinging door flipped behind the fleeing men. The shot tore into the wood and threw slivers of oak around the echoing barroom.

Dredger reloaded and charged outside. The three remaining inside could hear the bellow of the enraged saloon keeper. "Keep arunnin', you pig-stickin' varmints! If'n I ever ketch ary one of yew in this end of town again I'll blow yore blasted hides fulla holes!" He stamped inside again and walked directly up to Miss Barnes and said; "Please forgive my backsliding a few minutes ago. I should'a joined up with yew when Slim asked. Naow, yew have my solemn word thet we'll get in to them wagons fust if'n we have to shovel

out the snow with tablespoons!" He laid a protective hand on the polished bar. "Digger John! What in thunderation air yew laughing at?"

TWO WEEKS passed and winter lessened. Miss Lottie Barnes and company warily watched the snow thin down. The Hounds stayed at Dutch Flat, located just two miles away, and watched Digger John exercise his burros. He'd rope them together and start out, keeping to the rocky ridges, when the dawn was breaking and the snow was frozen hard. Their sharp hoofs carried them swiftly over the hard surface but sank as swiftly when they hit the soft snow. When one of the little animals sank into the soft snow, Digger would spread his feet wide and gently lift the floundering burro back onto a hard surface. A member of the Hounds was regulated to the task of following Digger and his exercising burros. John always headed out of Gold Run, away from the Minnesota Hill road, so the watcher would let him go and check up when he came back a couple of hours later.

Irish Mac brought in a herd of mules, constructed several sleds and waited for the snow to melt. The days passed and Digger exercised his burros, the Hounds kept a check on him and the tension mounted. Soon the snow would melt and the race would be on. Then, to increase the strain, the snow started again. Twenty-four inches in twenty-four hours splayed down, leaving the surface feathery and impossible to walk upon. Both camps were disgusted. The Hounds snuggled closer to the stove in Dutch Flat and the Gold Run crew gazed disconsantly at the snow covered slopes. Then, the wind started to blow and the powder snow was piled in drifts until the country looked like the sand dunes bordering the ocean. The wind stopped and Digger John announced that he was ready to lead the rush to the ore filled wagons.

Dredger Dan and Slim were amazed. They protested; "Those burros can't go five miles in this type snow! They'll bog down and die on the trail. We'll lose our burros and those Hounds up in Dutch Flat will have the mules to get that ore out without any opposition!"

DIGGER laughed and answered. "Yew just don't understand burros. They're as smart as a human. They'll try every trick a lazy Indian knows to git outa work but yew can teach 'em anythin'. I kin talk burro talk an' we got it all figured out. Git dressed an' come on, 'cause we'll need yew two to help me load the sacks of ore."

Arguments were futile. So, the party hitched the burros and threw on the forked, ore carrying harness and the thirty burros were strung out in a line and the trek began. The Hounds rushed to hitch up their mules and sleds and were soon trodding along behind the Barnes group. The Hounds were in high spirits because the trail was broken by the burros and the big mules had no difficulty.

Four miles out and Digger called a halt. He stationed Dredger and Slim in the trail with shotguns and gave a warning. "Don't let them mule-lovers git close. If'n they see what I'm about to do they'll start shootin'." Bewildered, the two men took positions on ledges and the muzzles of their guns kept the Hounds back.

Digger unloaded the first burro and Miss Lottie was amazed as she watched him fit the animals with minature snowshoes! They were cleverly made with ribs and buckskin, just like the pairs Digger and the rest of the party wore. She was more amazed as the burros submitted to such things being fastened on their tiny feet. Dredger and Slim were called in and Lottie pointed speechlessly at the burros, trotting wide legged across the top of the snow pack!

The Hounds were left behind with their floundering mules and wondering how in tarnation the burros could walk on air. Hours later, Digger camped by the wagons and explained.

"All the time them Hounds were awatchin' me exercise them burros, I was far enough away so's the watcher couldn't see what I was doin'.

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report the killing. He'd tell the lawman that old Rusty had turned the salt water from the well into the creek. He'd discovered it and gone over to arrest the old man and bring him in to the sheriff, but the oldster had made a play for his gun. Jake didn't have no choice but to kill him. It was clear cut. And to back it up all Sheriff Webb would have to do was taste the salt water flowing through Flint Creek and take a look at Rusty lying there with the scattergun still in his hands.

HE WAS just nearing his cabin when he saw the dun horse coming down the trail from Arapaho. There was no mistaking the tall, lean waisted man in the saddle. Jake felt an uneasy feeling stirring in his stomach. Funny that Sheriff Webb would be riding out this time of morning.

The lawman pulled rein in front of Jake's cabin and slid out of the saddle. "Howdy, Jake," the lawman greeted, "Out sort of early ain't yuh?"

Jake grinned to hide the nervous twitch that tugged the muscles of his mouth. No reason to get scared now, he tried to reason. He had aimed to tell the sheriff about old Rusty anyway. This just saved him a trip into town. But the words wouldn't come out easy like he had figured.

"Had a little excitement up the creek, Sheriff." Jake said, straining to keep his voice steady. "Come on in and I'll tell yuh about it. I could use a drink myself."

The lawman shook his head. "Got no time for visiting, Jake. Fact is I just dropped out to tell you about that salt water in yore creek, but I take it you already know about it."

Jake sucked in his breath. "You know about that salt water, eh, Sheriff?" Maybe, he thought, it was going to be easier to tell the sheriff about old Rusty than he'd figured. If the sheriff already knew the old driller had polluted his creek he wouldn't hold it against Jake for trying to arrest the oldster. A man's got a right to defend his property.

The sheriff grinned. "Damndest thing I ever heard of," he said, "young Jody Cullers was hittin' the bottle pretty hard when he pulled out of Arapaho last night, but I never figgered he'd turn his wagon over and dump that load of cowlick block salt in the creek."

Jake b l i n k e d stupidly. "Block salt?"

The sheriff nodded. "It'll wash down in a day or so. Old man Cullers is sending a hand over with a well pump. You can pump stock water outta yore well until the salt water runs down the creek. Speakin' of salt water Jake, old Rusty Welch told me a couple of days ago he was shuttin' down his well until he could get you to let him dig another salt water pit. Hate tuh see the oldster losing that production. Figgered I might ride up there with yuh this morning and help you two iron out the trouble."

Jake tried to answer but his throat seemed suddenly raw and he choked over the words. It was like he'd taken a drink out of the creek flowing there before him. Or like maybe a rope had tightened around his neck. His eyes blurred and he sank limply on the cabin step.

As if from a distance he could hear Sheriff Waldo Webb saying, "What's the matter, Jake? You look sick."

THE END

A Jailbird Rides Back

By Ray Gaulden

Vick Fallard had been convicted wrongly once, but he wouldn't be sent up for something he hadn't done again—this time he'd be guilty!

DICK FALLARD reined his dun off the main trail and approached the town from behind. This was Tremont. This was the old home town. He had been away for three years; now he was back and he felt nothing except the hate that was a dark, fierce thing inside him.

It was late and the wind whispered dismally about the night-shrouded false-fronts as he rode warily down an alley, a tight-lipped young man with dark, brooding eyes and pale, sunken cheeks. He dismounted when he came to the rear of one of the buildings, a big, paint-peeled structure that he remembered all too well. His lips twisted bitterly as he noticed the pale lamplight that seeped from a fly-specked window.

He wen quietly to the back door and rapped lightly. He heard a man grumbling as he crossed the floor inside. The door swung open and Jeb Bender peered out. Then the storekeeper's water eyes wen wide as recognizaion hit him. He tried to jump back and close the door, but Fallard's foot was in it.

Fallard put his shoulder against the door and shoved. It gave and he stepped quickly inside and closed it behind him. He had a gun in his hand now and there was a twisted grin on his lips.

He said quietly, mockingly, "You don't look glad to see me, Jeb."

The storekeeper's thin face was white and his mouth was jerking. He moved back into the room until he bumped into the table. He swallowed hard and his adams apple bobbed up and down in his skinny throat. "How come you're out of the pen, Vick?" he croaked. "How come you're back here?"

That warped grin stayed on Fallard's face and his icy eyes bored into Bender's. "I broke out, Jeb, went over the wall a few nights ago. I couldn't stand it any longer, cooped up, thinking about how you lied to put me there."

The storekeeper put his hands down and gripped the edge of the table. His face was shiny with sweat. "I didn't lie about you, Vick. It was you that robbed me that night."

Fallard shook his head slowly. "Your eyes never were any good, Jeb. I said I didn't know who took your stinking money, and I was telling the truth. But you figured because I had a bad name in this town that it just had to be me, even though you admitted the man was wearing a mask."

Bender's shoulders were slumped, but suddenly he came erect, a spark of anger glowing in his watery eyes. "Well, even if I did make a mistake that night, you got what was coming to you. You always was a bad one, Vick, raising hell and letting your brother, Bruce, do all the work."

Fallard's eyes were smoldering and he gripped the gun hard. "I've had a long while to think about this, Jeb, and this time I am going to rob you. Open that safe!"

The storekeeper licked his lips for a moment, then sighed and shuffled over to the old iron safe in the corner. He knelt and fumbled with the dial.

"Clean it out," Fallard ordered harshly. "Give me every damned cent you've got."

When he had the money, he backed toward the door. Then he stopped and brought the gun up. His lips were tight against his teeth and he said, more to himself than to Bender, "Here's where I pay off for those days I was locked in a filthy cell."

He squeezed the trigger twice and watched Bender slump to the floor, knowing the man would never get up. Fallard stood there a moment while some of the hate ran out of him and his stomach quivered with revulsion. It was the first time he had ever killed a man.

SOMEWHERE a door slammed and Fallard whirled around, leaped out into the darkness. A gun crashed down the alley as he was flinging astride his mount. Then he was racing out of town. He twisted in the saddle and threw a glance over his shoulder, cursing as he spied the dark blob of a rider back there behind him. He hadn't counted on this; he had figured he would get away without being seen.

He wondered if that was old Pop Lester back there behind him. Pop had been sheriff two years ago when Fallard was sent to the pen. Lester was a bloodhound; he would follow a man to hell and gone.

Fallard pounded across the flats toward the hills where there was a pass that would take him through the mountains. He splashed across a shallow creek and memories came crowding around him. At the upper end of that stream was the little place where he was born; the ranch that his brother, Bruce, had sweated and slaved to build into something.

Good old Bruce—steady, hard-working—wearing himself to a frazzle, and getting little help from Fallard, who spent most of his time drinking and gambling in town. Vick Fallard couldn't stand ranch life. The monotony of it was too much for his restless nature.

Fallard wondered now how things were at the ranch, how his mother was getting along. He'd had a letter

from Bruce about a month ago, but that big brother of his was never a hand to say much.

Fallard cursed the evil thing that lurked within him, that had made him kill the storekeeper. He hadn't really planned to do that. He had intended to rob old Bender and slap him around some. But the hate had gotten the best of him. That damned hot temper of his.

Suddenly, Fallard felt the buckskin falter and then he heard the thin, sharp sound of a rifle. He turned and saw the man who was following him; saw that he had stopped atop a little rise long enough to use his carbine.

Fallard raked the wounded mount with his spurs and the tough little pony responded briefly. But Fallard knew he was about finished. They were in the hills now, but they would never reach the pass. They would never be able to shake that law-dog now.

He was going to have to make a stand and he remembered a good spot not far ahead. He'd hole up and wait for that lawman to come along. Then he would stop that gent and get his horse. One more killing couldn't make any difference now.

HE WAS ALMOST to the place he had in mind when the buckskin quit cold, unable to carry him farther. He leaped down and quickly sent a bullet into the horse's head. Then his eyes whipped toward the moon-washed flats, watching that rider down there start the climb into the hills.

Fallard began to run and presently the sandstone cliff loomed ahead. His breath as coming fast. He climbed the sloping, rough walls of the canyon and hunkered down behind a rock to wait. He checked the loads in his gun and listened to the sound of the rider drawing nearer.

He heard the rush of water and he walked back a little ways to where there was a sheer drop-off of a hundred feet. He saw the dark waters of the swift-flowing river down there below, saw the jagged rocks, and he remembered the times he had come here with Della Roberts. He remembered her laughter and the way the wind used to play through her hair. They had seen a lot of each other for a while and Fallard knew he could have married her. Maybe they could have bought that little place over at Two Buttes and raised a batch of kids. . . .

But deep inside, Fallard knew it wouldn't have worked out. He would have broken her heart, because he could never stay tied to one woman. She had been Bruce's girl in the first place, and then Vick Fallard had stepped in and swept her off her feet.

Della was Bruce's kind of girl—good and solid—and Vick knew he should have kept away from her. He reckoned she and Bruce were seeing each other again now. He wished he could have stopped by and seen them for a minute, just to say hello and to get the picture of them again in his mind.

And his mother . . . She was getting old now . . . . Funny how he hadn't thought about this before. But down there in prison all he could do was feel sorry for himself and nurse the hate that was like a spreading sore inside him.

Fallard went back to the rock to wait. His eyes searched the darkness, for he no longer heard the sound of the rider's horse. Brush popped and Fallard brought his gun up. He saw a dark form come out of the brush and make a run toward the rocks at the base of the cliff. He came fast, weaving, bent low, an elusive target.

Fallard fired, but knew he had missed. He waited for the man to show himself. It was still for a minute and he could hear the roar of the river. Then the man down there in the darkness called out:

"Better throw your gun down, mister and call it quits. This is the law talking."

A cold, sick feeling swept Fallard and his mind whirled. He knew that voice, for it belonged to his brother, Bruce. It was crazy. It didn't make sense. Bruce was a cowman, not a lawman. What had he been doing in town so late?

Fallard swallowed hard and his

mouth felt dry. Finally, he said, "Bruce, this is your kid brother. What the hell are you doing here?"

FALLARD wasn't sure, but he thought he heard a gasp from below. Then his brother said, "I didn't know it was you, kid. You—you killed old Bender."

"Yes, I killed him, Bruce. But I didn't have any idea it was you behind me."

Bruce said, "I took the job about a month ago, kid. It hasn't rained in a long time. All the cattle are gone. Ma took sick and there's been a lot of doctor bills. Pop Lester went into business for himself and they offered me his job. I figured I'd keep it long enough to put us back on our feet."

Fallard hunkered there, listening to the sound of the water again, his head cocked a little to one side, his eyes bitter. Finally, he said, "You figuring on taking me in, Bruce?"

Bruce said miserably, "I've got to, kid. I'm sworn to uphold the law. You killed a man tonight."

"Damn it, Bruce, that old fool lied me into the pen."

"That didn't give you the right to kill him. Are you coming down, kid?"

Vick Fallard licked his lips, his mind racing. "No Bruce, I'm not going back to jail again. I couldn't stand it."

A wolf howled somewhere off in the night and then Bruce said, "I'm coming up after you, kid. I—I can't let you get away with murder."

Vick saw his brother stand up and begin to move up the slant. Vick Fallard arose and took a step back, his head spinning crazily. He brought his gun up, then lowered it. A man couldn't kill his own brother, he thought, and a man like Vick Fallard could not go back to a lonely prison cell, either.

He began moving back, his legs stiff, his body cold and numb. He saw his brother come into sight and he heard him say, "Drop that gun, kid."

Vick Fallard shook his head and he didn't stop. The rush of the water was loud in his ears now, and then he heard Bruce's voice again:

"Kid, lookout where you're going!"

But Vick Fallard didn't stop. He knew where he was going. There was a tight little smile on his lips as he stepped into space. He figured it was best this way.

THE END

3 MORE GUNSWIFT NOVELETS

will lead off our next issue

★ **THAT HARD-TO-RILE SHERIFF OF RATTLE TOWN**

by Rex Whitechurch

★ **DEATH TO FORT DEFIANCE**

by D. B. Newton

★ **GLORY ROAD**

by Walter A. Tompkins

watch for our January issue

OWL HOOT MUSIC

By A. Kenneth Brent

Dad Foster was willing to take any chance in order to stop this kid before it was too late!

DAD FOSTER felt the chill night wind on his back and the cold gun metal at the base of his skull at almost the same moment. He sat very still, the palms of his hands resting flat upon the rough pine table, and stared down at the little mound of gold particles he had been weighing. He wondered if the man behind him would be content to take only his gold.

The gunman moved cautiously around the table until he was facing Foster. The old man's eyes opened wide in surprise as he saw his captor. He was just a boy—eighteen, nineteen at the most, Foster reckoned.

"Sit just like you are," the kid said, his voice not quite steady. "Keep yore hands flat on the table, and you won't get hurt."

The kid pushed a chair back about three feet from the table and sat down. He kept the forty-five in his hand but let it rest on his leg.

"Yuh don't need to worry about yore gold," he said as he saw Foster look down at the mound of bright dust. "I only take from them that can afford to lose it."

"Then what's your business in my cabin?" Dad Foster asked quietly.

"The sheriff from Cottonwood is on my trail," the kid said simply. "I lifted two thousand off a fat rancher other side of there this afternoon. My horse gave out on me about a mile back, so I ducked into yore cabin. I'll just sit tight here until th' sheriff gives up th' chase."

Dad Foster looked at the boy. There was an honest, clean-cut quality about him. "This your first hold-up, kid?" he asked.

The kid nodded reluctantly. "Yeah," he said finally. "It's my first but it won't be my last!"

"Them's mighty hasty words, boy," Foster said quietly.

"I reckon I know what I'm doin'," the kid said harshly. "My dad was honest and played the game square. But because he figured he'd rather fight than sell out his little spread to a thieving range hog, he was murdered—and the man who done it got off scott free. I figure I can take money off men like that just as easy as they can take it off the little fellows."

Dad Foster stared down at his hands resting flat on the rough table. "You're pickin' out a mighty tough trail for yourself, son," he said, "and it's only got one end. Right now you think you'll only take from them that can afford to lose it, but time will come you'll take from anybody that's got it. And someday you'll have tuh use that gun because some men won't give up what they've sweated for without a fight. Just like yore dad. And when yuh've used that gun there'll be a rope waitin' for you—it's mighty hard tuh cheat that rope."

The kid's face flushed, but the hard griminess still lingered around his mouth. "Reckon you've talked about enough, mister," he said flatly.

NEITHER OF them spoke for several minutes. Dad Foster stared at the blank wall, the kid watched the cabin door. A flash of light from the kid's shirt pocket suddenly caught Foster's attention. He made out the top of a silver plated harmonica.

"How about a few tunes, Kid?" he asked nodding his white head at the instrument.

"No, thanks," the kid said. "Reckon I'd better keep my hand on my gun."

Dad Foster nodded at a corner shelf on which a long-silver-plated harmonica. "Mind if I reel off a few?" he asked.

The kid hesitated a long moment and then said, "No, reckon not. In fact, it might be a good idea. Make th' sheriff think everything's normal in here in case he rides by."

The old man went to the shelf and took down the harmonica. He shook the dust off of it, beat it on his hand a few times, and blew the scale. Then he returned to his chair and broke into a lively version of *I'm Leavin' Cheyenne*. He watched the kid intently as he played, saw him relax and the hard lines around his mouth vanish. He *was* just a boy, the old man decided.

The kid smiled when Dad Foster had finished. "Little bit off key, but pretty good," the kid said, and added, "used to play every night myself sittin' by th' fire while we were on roundups or trailin' a herd. Don't reckon there was anything I liked doin' much more."

Dad Foster was right in the middle of his next tune when the kid jumped to his feet, tense and alert.

"Riders!" he snapped. "Listen, I'm gonna hide behind that door to th' next room. I'll have my gun on you all th' time, so don't try any funny stuff."

The kid had just gotten out of sight when the riders came into the yard. The door to the cabin opened and a big man with a star on his vest filled the doorway.

"Evening, Dad," he said. "I heard mouth harp music in here. Who you playing for?"

Foster hesitated a moment and then said, "No one, Max. Just reeling off a few tunes for my own listen."

The sheriff tugged at his gray mustache. "Well," he said, "I'll be ridin' on. We're after a young gent."

The sheriff closed the door and a moment later the rataplan of hoof beats sounded again. The kid came slowly from the other room and sat down opposite the old man again.

"You played it smart," he said. "Now let's have some more mus—"

HE GOT NO further. The cabin door burst open suddenly and the sheriff lunged into the room. This time a gun filled his hand. The kid wheeled out of his chair and clawed for the forty-four he had holstered.

With a speed that belied his many years Dad Foster jumped for the table. He grabbed the gold weighing scales and, unmindful of the fine

golden particles scattering over the floor, slammed the scales at the kid's gun hand. The forty-four spun in the air and clattered to the floor.

"Couldn't let you use that gun, kid," Dad Foster panted. "Even if you got away now, yuh'd pay for it later."

A half-relieved smile played on the kid's lips. He looked from the sheriff back to the old man. "It's okay," he said quietly. "I reckon it's best this way after all."

"I'm glad yuh see it that way, son," Dad Foster said.

"I sure did enjoy that harmonica music, mister," the kid said. "When I get this thing over with, I might drift back this way if it's all right with you."

"I'd admire tuh have yuh come back, kid," the oldster said.

One of the sheriff's deputies came into the cabin and walked over to the kid. "Let's go, son," he said.

They walked slowly out of the cabin, but the sheriff remained behind. He turned to Dad Foster.

"I couldn't figure you sittin' in here playin' that harmonica by yourself, Dad," he said, "so I sent the rest of the posse on and stayed behind for a look-see."

"I figured you'd do something like that, Max," Dad Foster said. "That's why I talked him into lettin' me play." He added, "Go easy on th' kid, will yuh? He's a good boy just got twisted up in his way of lookin' at things."

"I'll recommend clemency for him," the sheriff said. "He'll probably just get a suspended sentence."

Foster followed the sheriff to the dor and watched them ride off. The kid waved to him.

When they were out of sight, Dad Foster closed the door. If the kid did come back, he'd have to tell him the truth about what had happened tonight, but then maybe the kid wouldn't mind.

He'd have to tell the kid that he could understand what people said because he could read lips. But he couldn't hear a note of music because he had been stone deaf for years. That was why the sheriff had figured he wasn't playing the harmonica just for himself tonight.

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WILD WEST QUIZ By IDAHO BILL

(Answers On Page 96)

1. A *dead soldier* was the wild western's name for
   a dead soldier
   a bad proposition
   an empty coffee pot
   an empty whiskey bottle

2. In the unsettled west of sixty or seventy years ago, which of these would have likely brought on a *necktie party,* without the usual formalities?
   Land-grabbing
   Stealing a horse
   Dealing from the bottom of the deck
   Killing another fellow's cow to eat

3. *Tarantula juice* was the favorite name on the frontier for
   whiskey
   the poison of the tarantula
   black coffee
   tomato juice

4. *Riding shotgun,* a particular activity between 1860-1890, was
   riding an explosive bronc
   riding in a posse
   guarding a stagecoach
   riding armed to the teeth

5. When a horse *kettles,* according to the old cowpuncher, he
   runs
   stumbles
   bucks
   falls

6. *Tapaderos,* a familiar name in the southwest, was the name for
   a group of riders
   the horse herd
   the hooded saddle stirrups
   the mule skinner's boots

7. To *pecos a man,* in the days when there was no law west of the Pecos, and very little east of it, was to
   shoot him and roll him into the Pecos
   chase him across the Pecos
   make him take a bath
   hire him to ride herd on the Pecos

8. You've heard of the cowboy's *duds;* can you select the right definition?
   A cowboy's sad mistakes
   His buddies
   His extra clothes
   His saddle equipment

9. The frontiersman, who had to travel in the land of the wild tribes, often saved his scalp by the knowledge that Indians usually attack at
   dawn
   twilight
   midnight
   sunup

10. What Indians, rated the best horsemen in the world, could hang from the back of their racing mounts in such manner as to almost conceal their bodies, yet were able to fire at their victims?
    Apaches
    Comanches
    Sioux
    Pawnees

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As the man reached for the reins the girl slapped his face hard.

Bought By Bullets

By Lee Floren

Jim Matts recognized Ike Hubbard's breed — he was rough and arrogant, but underneath was a straight-shooting man. And when Hubbard was driven to the point of acting like blackleg then something was deadly wrong!

1

TIM MATTS was finishing his coffee when the two cowmen stopped and looked at his bronc tied to the hitchrail outside the Last Bite Cafe. One man was wide and thick, probably in his late forties, and the other was a thin, hatchet-faced man about twenty some, Jim figured. They were studying his buckskin with a close scrutiny.

"They're looking at your horse's brand," the waitress said.

Jim grinned and slid off the stool, a lanky redhead of twenty-four summers. He had tried to get the pretty waitress into a conversation but she had ignored him like a Sioux squaw ignored a drunken trapper.

"How much are the damages, Miss?"

"Seventy cents."

Jim dug for some change. Then he speared a toothpick and admired her taffy-colored hair, as she bent over the cash register.

"You'll be seein' a heap of me, Miss," he promised.

"I've heard that before."

Jim thought, *A sassy imp, huh?* and said, "I mean it, I'll be around a spell, I reckon." He turned toward the door and stopped. The big man blocked it.

For the first time, Jim got a good look at his face. His jowls were heavy, marked by the map—like network of broken red veins, and arrogance and power lay in his dead-pan eyes.

"Your bronc, stranger?" He jerked a thick thumb toward the buckskin.

Jim didn't like his tone. "I'm the only customer here," he reminded.

Something moved across the lifeless eyes. "Don't get flip, cowboy. I asked a question. Answer it."

Jim thought, *Oh oh, trouble's comin' my way* ... and wondered why. He decided to dodge. "He's my pony."

"D Bar S iron on him, huh?"

"That's his brand."

The thin man had come behind and now he stood with his thumbs hooked against the brass cartridges of his gunbelt.

"Wyomin' brand, Ike," the thin man said.

Ike nodded. He spoke to Jim. "Lookin' for a job, Mister?"

Jim shook his head.

"You know Tom Shafer?"

The tone had sharpened. The thin man stood silent, watching Jim with quick eyes. Jim wondered, "What t'hell is this, anyway?"

Of course he knew Tom Shafer. He'd ridden into Muletail valley to visit with Tom. He'd written Tom he was coming and saddled up and drifted out of Cheyenne. He'd been tired of his grocery store and he'd turned it over to his only clerk to run until he"d got back home from his vacation at Tom's.

There was trouble here—trouble with a capital T—and he decided to play dumb.

"Can't recollect the name, he murmured.

Silence for three seconds. Then Ike said, "You're driftin' through, I take it? That right?

"Might be."

The thin man broke in. "Ike—"

"I'll handle this, Whitey."

Jim saw anger color the thin man's eyes and move his lips. The man settled back, shrugged. "You're the boss."

Impatience rubbed Jim with sandpaper sharpness. "You all through with your questions?" He let cynicism edge his voice.

But Ike just stroked his bottom lip in thought. Finally, "We'll keep an eye on him, Whitey." He turned and Whitey turned and the corner hid them as they went down the sidewalk. Jim listened to the hard pound of their bootheels on the dried planks.

"Nice pair," he said.

The color had returned to the waitress' face.

He asked, "Who are they?"

THE BIG MAN is Ike Hubbard. He runs the Slash Eight outfit out on Mule Buttes. The other was his rider, Whitey."

"*Gun* rider," corrected Jim Matts. "His last name?"

"I've never heard it. I don't think he has one. All I've heard him called is Whitey." She was wiping the counter carefully with a damp cloth.

Jim reached out. She let her hand be in his for a second, then she drew it slowly back.

Jim asked, "More?"

"Hubbard's been losing cattle. He blames his losses on Tom Shafer. Tom started a cow-outfit on Chalk Creek three years ago. It's come to—almost open warfare. Now don't bother me any longer, please?"

Bother you, huh?

Jim introduced himself. "And your name?"

"You guess at it," was the tart reply.

He admired her back and the clean swing of her as she walked into the kitchen The swinging doors came shut and hid her. Jim grinned and went outside. The late fall sunshine lay thin and cold across this Montana grass and the wind had a bite.

So Old Man Hubbard had gone to the cupboard and found his beefsteaks missing...and he blamed their loss on Tom Shafer...Well, now, that was something, huh? He glanced at his buckskin and decided he needed some cartridges, what with trouble looking at him again. Hubbard evidently figured he'd ridden in to help the small ranchers.

A buckboard came out of the livery-barn, wheels lifting to the idle dust. Jim glanced at it and then looked away but soon whipped his gaze back to the driver. For the driver was a woman, alone on the seat, and the wind, coming in, pulled her small black hat a little, showing him her golden hair. He remembered the golden hair of the girl in the restaurant and he decided this woman looked a lot like the waitress.

She drove by, the duns stepping high against their collars, and she glanced at him, not curious and not interested. He decided she was older than the waitress and let it go at that.

He went on toward the hardware store.

A man said, behind him, "Just a minute!"

Jim turned sharply. *Hubbard again, huh,* he thought. But the cowman was not talking to him. He stood in the street and he had stopped the woman's team, holding the off-horse by the bridle.

She said, "Get your hands off that bridle."

Whitey moved in and took the reins and Hubbard went to the buckboard. Jim stood and watched and wondered. He noticed the waitress had come out of the cafe. She stood and watched and Jim got the swift impression she was vitally interested in this. Another man had stopped and was watching, too.

A townsman, Jim figured.

JIM TURNED to go into the hardware store, then stopped at the woman's angry tone. He looked out on the street again. Hubbard had the woman by the wrist. Evidently she had aimed to start the team again and he had grabbed her.

She said, cold-like, "Get your hand off me!"

The townsman stepped off the sidewalk, stopped, stepped back. Jim thought, "This is no business of mine," but he stood silent. He saw a hand whip back and heard the smack of the doubled glove across Hubbard's jowls. He was close enough to see the blood come in and kill the pale streaks left by the glove. That girl could take care of herself.

Hubbard had both of her wrists now, the reins idle over the dashboard. Whitey held the team and grinned. Jim Matts had his .45 out. He came in behind Whitey and the gunman heard his boots and turned.

Jim said, "Don't pull, Whitey!"

Whitey looked at the six-shooter. He said, "What chances would I have?" and Ike Hubbard heard him. The cowman dropped the woman's wrists and looked at Jim.

"This ain't your play," he growled.

"I'm making it mine."

Jim had Whitey's gun. He spun it out and it landed in the dust and plowed to a stop. He moved ahead then, going toward the buckboard.

"You don't want this man around?" He spoke to the woman.

She stormed, "Does it look like it?"

He liked the way her hazel eyes lighted up and he liked the set of her small mouth. These affected him. Another thing hit him: Hubbard's arrogance against him, back there in the Last Bite. He lifted his gun and pulled it down on Hubbard's head.

The blow was glancing, but it knocked Hubbard back. Jim tripped him and the cowman sat down, dazed but not out. Jim stepped back and looked at Whitey. The gunman's eyes were too tight but he was silent.

No danger from Whitey, Jim figured. He walked over and got Hubbard's gun and tossed it over beside Whitey's.

"Drive on, ma'am."

"Thank you, sir."

The wheels rolled and the horses trotted off. The buckboard turned a corner and only the dust hung behind to mark its path. Whitey was getting Hubbard to his feet and Jim watched him get his boss up.

Hubbard pushed his hat back and felt of his head.

Jim said, sardonically, "It didn't bust the skin. Your stetson was too thick, I guess. And your head is thick, too."

"Get me to the doc," Hubbard said.

Whitey looked at the guns in the dust.

Jim said, "Just forget those."

Hubbard could stand better now. He said, "You look like a man of sense, stranger. If you are, you'll leave pronto."

Whitey was silent.

JIM WATCHED them go down the street until they turned into a log cabin with the sign *J. W. WALKER, M.D.* on it. He picked up the two guns and took them into the hardware store where he laid them on the counter. He told the clerk to give them to Hubbard and Whitey when they came for them.

"You've made two bad enemies," the clerk said.

Jim said, "Two boxes of .45 shells, one of .25-35 ca'tridges."

"Hubbard's a hard man; so is Whitey."

Jim asked, "Where does Tom Shafer live?"

The clerk told him to go out the east trail. Jim paid for the shells. The clerk said, "That was Tom's wife--Mabel—that you helped."

Jim's brows rose. "You don't say. When did Tom get married?"

"A week ago, I guess." The clerk punched the register. "Tom's in bed you know; darn sick, too."

Jim took the paper bag containing the cartridges. He didn't ask what was the matter with Tom; he figured he knew. He'd met Hubbard and Whitey and they were bucking Tom, and he figured Tom had a bullet hole or two in him. He got his stirrup and went up and a woman's voice held his spurs.

"Thank you, sir," she said.

The pretty waitress stood on the sidewalk.

"Thanks for what?"

"For helping Mabel."

Jim grinned. He said, "She told me something to tell you. She said she didn't want anbody else to know. Come closer and I'll whisper it to you."

She frowned but moved close. He bent low and caught the sweet fragrance of her hair. He kissed her on the lips. They were open a little and they closed suddenly in surprise.

"Why, damn you——"

"Goodbye," Jim said.

2

THOUGH HE rode his spurs, Jim never did catch up with Mabel Shafer's buckboard, for the woman drove like a demon. He pulled the buckskin down to a run-

ning-walk and gave up catching her.

So Tom was in bed and in bad shape....And married, too. Hell of a way to spend a honeymoon, sick like that. He gave himself to the task of appraising this range.

Good grass land. Haystacks down yonder along the creeks. Well, a man needs plenty of hay, what with these Montana winters. He wondered if Tom had ever told anybody that he, Jim Matts, was in cahoots with him on the Circle W. That's why he ran that damned grocery store back in Cheyenne. He wanted to make some money fast and every cent he'd make clear he'd send to Tom to stock their ranch. Come any day now and he'd drift out of the grocery business and come back to the range with Tom.

Tom had picked good cow-country, no two ways about that. Jim swung off the trail and looked at a small bunch of steers and cows. They wore a Slash Eight iron on the right ribs and Jim remembered that the waitress had said that was Ike Hubbard's brand.

Good beef, he thought.

They were Herefords. Whitefaces with beef to their hocks. Calves fat and steers fat and cows. Jim rubbed his palm across his red-hair and admired them.

Miles further, he admired some of his and Tom's Circle W cows. They were also top-blooded Herefords. An hour later, he came down on Chalk Creek and the Circle W ranchhouse and corrals lay ahead, overtowered by a huge butte crowned by dark rock.

The creek meandered through a lava formation the color of chalk. He splashed across it and rode through the wire gate, closing it behind him. He saw the two buckboard-broncs rolling in the pasture. Mabel had driven fast to have the horses already unharnessed and turned loose.

A pup came out, barking and jumping. Hens rand around the henhouse. Down at the barn a colt neighed. The shadows were gathering below the butte as the sun was sinking.

Mabel came out on the porch. She said, surprised, "Why—it's you, huh? I wondered what the puppy was barking about."

Jim decided to have some fun with her. "I followed you out, ma'am. I just—couldn't well, I reckon I fell in love with you, back there in town."

She stared at him. "Are you crazy?"

Jim almost had to grin. "What's the matter with me following you? Fellow back at town told me you lived here with your dad, who runs this outfit. I'm not too bad to look at." He grinned. "Or am I?"

"I'm a married woman," she said crisply. "Turn your bronc, drifter, and ride out. I thank you for your help down in town but here—"

Jim stepped down and went up the steps. He tried to put his arm around her and she stepped back, alarm naked in her eyes.

A man called from inside, "Who's there, Mabel?"

"I don't know him. He's—he's—"

"I'll get out of bed."

"You stay right in bed, Tom Shafer! You know what the doctor said!"

Jim jabbed a thumb toward the door. "Who is that gent?"

"My husband."

Jim pulled his gun. "I'll fix him." He stepped into the room. Mabel grabbed his arm.

"Tom, he's got a gun!"

TOM SHAFER was sitting on the edge on his bed. He had a nightgown on and he was putting on his house-slippers. He stared at Jim, one slipper suspended, his mouth slack.

"Jim— Jim Matts!"

Mabel stared. "Jim Matts?"

Tom stood up, ludricous in the nightgown. "Why, you old devil! Jim, when did you get on this range?"

Jim hugged him. "Just a while back, fella. Good to see you."

Tom spoke to Mabel. "This is my partner, Jim Matts."

Mabel sat down. "My heavens, what a scare he gave me!" She started laughing. "Do you do this to all women, Jim?"

"Just the purty ones." Jim put his attention back on Tom. "What's the

matter with you? Where did the bullet hit you?"

"Bullet? What are you—? Hell, I got the measles!"

Jim pushed him back on the bed where Tom landed sitting-down. "You scared me half to death, fella. Measles! Here I figured mebbe Hubbard or Whitney had put a slug into your carcass."

"Have you had the measles?" asked Mabel.

Jim smiled. "When I was a kid."

"Then you won't get it again, the doctor says. Why didn't you tell me who you were down in town?"

"You never gave me a chance."

Jim wondered if Mabel had told Tom about Ike Hubbard's making trouble in town. He decided she had kept mum on that point. She wouldn't want to make Tom mad; he had a hair-trigger temper.

"You two meet in town?" Tom frowned.

Jim told him a cock-and-bull story about bumping into Mabel when she was coming out of a store, loaded with bundles. He asked if Tom had got the letter he'd sent from Cheyenne saying he was coming to Mule-tail valley. Tom said he hadn't gotten it. What had become of it, anyway?

Tom scowled. "I gave it to my clerk to mail. Maybe he forgot. His memory is about one minute long."

"How come you meet Ike Hubbard and Whitney?"

Jim told him how the two had braced him in the Last Bite. Tom Shafer, back under the covers, frowned and allowed Jim had crossed two tough men. Jim told him he'd've crossed them sooner or later, anyway, the way he figured.

"Just what is the trouble here?" he asked.

Well, the Slash Eight was losing stock, so Hubbard said. Tom figured they had lost quite a few head, too, judging from what he'd seen of the Slash Eight herds. And who was rustling it? He didn't know.

"You see, five other small ranchers moved in here when I come in three years back, Jim. We settled on the fringes of the Slash Eight range. Hubbard is no fool. He seen that the day of free grass was over so he planted his cowpunchers on homesteads, payin' them wages to sit out their entry requirements. Then he bought their homestead rights for a few dollars; hell, they couldn't use them. None of them wanted to settle down."

Jim nodded. "Old idea."

Well, as a result, Hubbard controlled the bottom land, and its good grass. But the newcomers were still on graze Hubbard cattle had formerly used. And Hubbard claimed the newcomers—especially Tom Shafer—were stealing Slash Eight beef.

"How about these other five ranchers?" Jim asked.

Tom shook his head slowly. "I don't believe it, Jim." He went on, giving their names: Stewart on Big Lime Creek, Marshall on Snake Butte, Henderson in the Piney Ridge country, Smith back in the rough section, and Britton on Willow Creek. "But a man can't tell, Jim. Each says he is losin' stock, too."

Jim got to his feet. "I'll be around for some time, Tom, I'll look around and see what I can see."

"Do that," Tom said.

JIM AND Mabel went outside. Mabel asked if he had had supper and he told about eating in the Last bite. The pretty waitress turned out to be Mabel's sister. Jim found out that her name was Colleen. The name fitted her, he thought. Jim said he would eat at the bunkhouse with the two hired hands and sleep there, too. Things had happened pretty fast here: his run-in with Hubbard and Whitney, and finding Tom sick and also married. He needs a little time to think it over.

He unsaddled his buckskin and turned him loose, taking his war-bag off his saddle. He carried it into the small bunkhouse and dumped it on the floor beside what appeared o be an unused bed. A sioux squaw, heavy and stolid, came in, her brown eyes shrewd in her weathered face.

"You new hand here?"

Jim nodded.

"You take that bunk. I get fresh blankets."

She waddled off. When she came back, she took the quilt off the bed and put on fresh blankets. She kept firing questions at Jim who answered some and let others ride. She did the cooking for the cowpokes, she said, and she pointed out the mess-hall, a small log building.

Two men rode in, left their broncs, unstripped them, turned them into the night-pasture. One was an ancient, grizzled man of indeterminate age, saddle-warped and tough as whang. His name was Croppy Hamilton. The other was a button, not more than seventeen, with blue, serious eyes and he was named Jiggs Lorens.

"You a new hand?" asked Croppy.

Evidently Tom Shafer had not let it be known that Jim was his partner in the circle W. That was just as well, Jim figured. Yeah, he was a new hand. Croppy looked at Jiggs Lorens and rubbed his bewhiskered chin.

"Figured the boss was runnin' close on dinero an' couldn't hire another hand. We've lost quite a few head the last year."

"Where they going?"

"Damn' if we know. We've rid our grass from one end to the other. We've found a few tracks but we always lost them on the sand strip."

Jim questioned them further about the sand strip. This sand information, left years before by a playful glacier, ran for thrity miles across northern Montana. Flat and level, it was about fifteen miles wide, a land of undulating dunes and scraggly greasewood.

"Winds howls there all the time," Croppy assured. "Goes east one day an' howls back west the next. Hell, a jackrabbit couldn't live to cross it—nothin' for him to eat. Them tracks went out there and then disappeared."

Jiggs Lorens spoke. "We ain't sure cows went out into the Strip, Jim. You see, a cow might walk into it for a half-mile or so, find out there ain't no graze, then turn back."

They went into the cookshack for chuck. Jim enjoyed the meal; the squaw was a good cook. Afterwards, he squatted on the porch, talking with Mabel who sat in the hammock, doing some sewing. Tom was asleep.

At eight he went to the bunkhouse. Croppy was reading a well-worn magazine and Jiggs was sewing the stitching on a boot, using a Myer sewing-awl. Croppy looked up from his bunk.

"Figured maybe you were Orville," he said.

Jim asked, "Who's Orville?"

Orville turned out to be a brother to Mabel and Colleen. He had come into this section right after Tom had come in, and he'd gone to work for Tom. Later his sisters had come and opened the Last Bite.

Jim turned in. He went to sleep with the lamp on. The bunkhouse was dark when he awoke. A match flared and the lamp came to life. Feigning sleep, Jim watched the newcomer.

He was thin, colorless, with a pointed nose and chin marked by fine dark whisker-stubble. He wore a buckskin jacket trimmed with metal and fringes and his pants were of California make and his boots unborn calf. He was a dandy, all right, Jim saw; this must be Orville.

Jim could see the old alarm clock hanging from a cord on the wall. It was almost two o'clock.

Orville noticed him in the bunk and he paused, leg up to pull off a boot. He looked at Jim for some time and then resumed undressing. He rolled into bed and cupped his palm over the lamp chimney and blew the light out.

2

JIM WAS UP early. The morning air was chilly. Snow was not far away. Jiggs and Croppy were up with him, morose at the breakfast table. Their meals finished, they harnessed a team, hooked the

bronco to a wagon, put some fence tools in the rig, and rumbled away to the east.

Tom was restless in his bed. Orville was still asleep. Mabel and Tom and Jim had a cup of coffee together in the darkness of Tom's room. Jim asked, "Why keep the room so dark?" and Mabel replied with, "You have to do that when somebody has the measles it protects their eyes. Measles—"

"Measles, hell!" Tom was disgusted.

"You'll be up in four days, the doc for said. Be patient," Mabel said.

Jim went to the bunkhouse. Orville's bunk was empty, unmade. The squaw said he hadn't eaten breakfast; he'd just saddled a horse and headed out. Jim got a fresh horse and put a kak on him.

He aimed to look over the five small ranchers, Tom's neighbors. Henderson proved to be a fat man, jovial and heavy in saddle. Marshall was thin and lanky, chewing tobacco. Smith was solid and muscular and Britton a sickly man who evidently had tuberculosis, Jim thought.

Stewarts, on Big Lime Creek, had gone in for wheat farming. He was irrigating from the creek and he was standing beside a grain bin when Jim rode up. Jim introduced himself and looked at the wheat in the wagon Stewart was loading with a big scoop shovel.

"Where do you haul your wheat?"

"Over to the railhead, across the Strip. W i l m i n g t o n's the town's name."

Jim had heard about Wilmington from Tom Shafer. The railroad had built into that town because of the silver mines on the mountains to the north; the railroad would not come any further, saying it would not pay to build into Muletail basin. To get to Wilmington, a man had to cross the Strip. And, according to Tom, it was a real job to get cattle across the sand, what with it blowing and filling the air. Jim noticed that Stewart had a respirator-mask on his wagon seat.

Stewart had the wagon half-filled with wheat. He got up on the seat and said, "That's all a man can haul across the Strip. Can't haul a full wagon-load across that sand." He got his lines and released his brake. "Us small cowmen are holdin' a meetin' tomorrow night at the Red Butte school-house, Matts. You gonna be there?"

"What's the p u r p o s e of the meetin'?"

Stewart shrugged let his team out and they plodded down the lane, heading for the bench-land. Jim swung his bronc and followed a creek, heading back toward the ranch. About five miles further on, he saw a rider leave the bottom land and head into the hills; he recognized Orville.

He let his mind run over the men he had met here on this graze. They all seemed square and above-board. A mile further, on Circle W grass, he met Whitey, who came out of the willows along the creek.

Jim said. "You're on Circle W grass, fella."

Whitey's small eyes studied him. Finally, "What's it to you, tinhorn?"

His arrogance rubbed Jim. "I own half of the Circle W. Me and Tom Shafer are pards."

Whitey leaned back in his kak hands on the horn. "So you been furnishin' Tom with cash, huh? We wondered how he managed to keep his head up." He straightened. "You're payin' on a dead hoss, man."

Jim looked up at the hills. Orville was hidden now by the rough out croppings. He took his gaze back to Whitey. He moved his horse close to the gunman's.

"We got off on the wrong foot down in town,' he said slowly. "I'd like to be friends with you an' Ike Hubbard"

Whitey scowled "Yeah?"

"No use going around with chips on our shoulders. I was wrong and I figure you two acted too fast, too."

Whitey relaxed He grinned and looked across space. Jim was waiting for that. His .45 whammed Whitey across the skull, flattening

his stetson. Whitey grunted, slid from saddle.

His startled horse jumped ahead, then stopped with reins trailing. Jim looked at his pistol, holstered it, then glared down at Whitey. "I'm getting good with that act," he murmured. "Now sleep awhile, scissorbill. By now you oughta find out I'm not jokin' when I say stay off my grass."

HE RODE at a lope, and a horseman was ahead, there where the road forked. Ike Hubbard sat his saddle like he'd been built into it. Jim told him what he'd done to Whitey and, strangely, Hubbard smiled.

"He's too big for his britches, Matts."

"He's your hand."

Hubbard's smile left. "He'll carry his gun against you, Matts." He loped off.

Jim scratched his head and remembered Hubbard's grin. The fellow seems almost human, he thought; he was pretty well loaded down with hard liquor yesterdaty in town. He continued toward the Circle W.

A rider came across the hills and he stopped. The wind had whipped Colleen's face and brought life out on it. "Hello, Jim," she said.

Jim scowled. "Yesterday you wanted to beat me, now you talk nice to me." Her horse fell into step besides his. "What caused the great change?"

"Yesterday, sir, I didn't know who you were."

Jim reminded her that he had given her his name while in the Last Bite. But she hadn't associated it with Tom Shafer, she maintained, although Tom had told her and Mabel about him, of course.

"We can be great friends." Jim smiled.

"Not the way you're acting," she stated. "I don't have the habit of kissing my friends."

"We won't be friends long," assured Jim.

"You think we'll get beyond the friendship stage?"

"I know we will."

She smiled at that, but he thought her smile a little wistful. He told her about seeing Orville back there and how he had pole-axed Whitey with the barrel of his cutter. Also about meeting Ike Hubbard.

"You've met everybody today, huh?"

Jim allowed he had and looked at the cloud-banked sky. She said she thought snow was close and she was right. For when they rode into the Circle W ranch the flakes were already falling, driven by a harsh, cold wind. A fire would feel good on a night like this.

Colleen was going to stay at the ranch for a couple of days, having left her cook in charge of the Last Bite. Jim banked the pot-bellied heater in the bunkhouse and went to bed to wake up when Orville came in.

"Blizzard out," Orville said.

Jim listened to the wind in the eaves. Orville put some more lignite coal on the heater and went to bed. The bunkhouse was icy cold when Jim got up. Orville slept late. He ate and borrowed Tom's sheepskin overcoat and got in his saddle on a sorrel. Colleen came into the barn.

"Where you going, Jim?"

"Wilmington," he said.

"I'll go with you."

JIM HAD NO complaint to make. They reached the Strip and the sand lay barren, whipped clean of snow. Here and there, behind a scraggly greasewood bush, lay a little snow, dirty with sand. undulating dunes rose and pitched and fell into gullies. Jim had never seen a land that weird or forboding.

He was glad when they had crossed it. The wind had lost its bite for the hills behind them cut it off. Neither spoke much and Jim figured it was around then below. Colleen said the storm would not last long for it was too early in the season for winter to come and stay.

He ran over the setup in his mind. Cattle were leaving Muletail range and they had to go somewhere. It was logical they were going into Wilmington for that town presented the

only close market that would demand much beef.

The town lay along the base of a gully that had its sides marked by slag heaps and narrow-gauge tracks for the ore cars. The morning shift had gone into the earth and the town was rather quiet. Colleen went to a restaurant to get a cup of coffee and Jim rode to the other end of town and back. He could see no slaughter-house. He rode up to the depot.

The operator was a garrulous old gent with a green-eye shade. Yes, the town shipped in beef; most of it was in cans. Some came in fresh in freezer cars. A slaughter-house in town? No! not that he knew about.

He took Jim into the warehouse and showed him some of the canned meat. It was in gallon cans and had the word "Chicago" stamped on the bottoms of the cans. Jim thanked him and headed for the big butcher shop on Main Street.

He met Ike Hubbard.

"Long way from home," Jim said.

Hubbard looked at him. "I could say the same about you, Matts."

"Where's your gun-dog—Whitey?"

Hubbard grinned. "Left him to home."

Jim thought, "Hell, he's almost friendly," and let it go at that. He came into the butcher-shop and stood beside the stove and warmed. The butcher, a fat, jovial gent, was busy with customers.

He had some fresh beef in his showcase but most of his beef was in cans. Jim looked at a gallon can on the counter. He turned it over and looked at one end then looked at another. He noticed the word "Chicago" was lacking on this can. He looked at another can. The word was on that one.

"Something, sir?" the butcher asked.

Jim put the can down. "Was looking for a fellow," he said. "Told me he'd meet me here."

"Oh." The eyes were sharp.

Jim moved back to the fire again and stood with his back against the heat. One can had "Chicago" on it and the other was bare.... Well, maybe two different packers sent them in to him. The seal on the can with "Chicago" was nicely done but the other seal was wide with the solder a little rough.

The customers left. The butcher came to the stove. "Friend hasn't shown up yet, huh?"

Jim allowed he hadn't. He remarked that it seemed odd to get meat in cans instead of fresh meat. The butcher told him he hadn't freezing facilities for large shipments of fresh meat. "Not much ice last winter—mild winter—an' we didn't get to put much ice in my ice-house."

"You'll get plenty this winter, looks like."

The man said it looked like an early winter. Jim told him that his friend evidently wasn't coming so he went outside. He went to the restaurant where he met Colleen and they ate and got their horses for the ride back. The girl had made some purchases and he tied the bundle to her saddle.

The wind had died completely and the cold was less severe. Jim thought, "I found out exactly nothing," and decided the hunch had been worth playing. So the beef came in by train, huh?

THE WIND WAS howling on the Strip, although there had been no wind until they had ridden to the sandy area. They rode with their heads against the sand and wind, and Jim silently cursed the weather and the terrain. Ahead of him he saw a blurred shape, moving toward them through the storm, and when the shape got closer he saw it was a team and wagon.

It was Stewart. He pulled in and rested his team and said, "Howdy, Matts; howdy, Miss Colleen. Nice weather, huh?"

Jim reined close and looked into the wagon. The double-box was almost filled with wheat and he remembered yesterday that Stewart said it would be almost impossible to move a full load of wheat across the Strip.

Yesterday he had started out with

just one-half a load.

"Hard on your team, ain't it?" Jim asked.

Stewart explained that the sand was frozen now and that made a full load possible. Jim nodded and asked if the farmer would be at the school-house for the meeting that evening. Stewart said he'd be there but he might be late and that he'd better hurry to Wilmington.

Jim and Colleen met Orville right after they had got off the Strip. The man had his sheepskin collar up high to fight the cold. They loped into the Circle W with the sun falling behind the hills.

They unstripped their cayuses and went to the house. Tom was sleeping and Jim and the girl and her brother had coffee and some cake Mabel had just baked. Orville asked where they had been and Jim told him about riding into Wilmington.

"Long ride on a cold day," Orville grunted around his pipe.

"Just looked the town over,' Jim asserted. "Wanted to see what kind of a burg it was. Evidently no local beef is going in there for sale . They get all their meat in cans; ship it in."

Jim saddled another horse and rode toward the school-house. Tom had wanted to ride with him but he had made the man stay in bed. Jim was puzzled. Somebody was whittling away at the herds. He figured it up. Over three hundred days in a year and if three cows or steers were stolen each day it would add up around a thousand a year. And that was a lot of beef. He knew the merchandising game and he figured a town the size of Wilmington would take three or four fat steers each day.

"They must be going to Wilmington," he thought.

4

IKE HUBBARD came out of the dusk there where the trails forked. He said, "Going to the meeting, huh, Matts?" and Jim nodded and asked him where he was heading for. Hubbard grinned. "Same place you are."

"Might be trouble."

Hubbard's eyes were flat. "I'm losin' cattle, as I've told you. Them farmers claim they're losin' stock, too. I don't hardly believe that. Yet it seems funny they'd go all the way to hold a meetin' if they weren't."

"Where's Whitey?"

"Hadn't headed into the home-ranch when I left. Guess this storm caught him an' he's holed up in some line-camp."

Jim didn't like the idea of Hubbard attending the meeting. Some of these sodbusters had short tempers and with Hubbard there—He was glad Whitey hadn't ridden with his boss. With the gunman at the meeting—

Buckboards and saddle-horses were tied to the hitch-posts when Jim and the cowman rode in. The lamplight from the windows showed across the glistening snow. Jim reasoned that maybe Ike Hubbard was stealing the nester's cows. He'd seen the cowman in Wilmington that day and what reason did Hubbard have to ride a storm-swept range to go to Wilmington when Muletail town was many miles closer?

Jim regarded the cowman in a new light. What if Hubbard was stealing the farmer's cattle and claiming all the time he was losing some of his own. That way he would break the small ranchers and drive them out of the country. He wanted their grass, didn't he? But if the cowman was doing that, he had a lot of gall coming to their meeting.

Eyes turned and stared at Hubbard when he came into the hall. The cowman took off his hat and took a seat beside Jim in the middle of the room. Jim nodded to the men and women he knew and one man asked, "Did you bring him here, Jim?"

Jim shook his head. Hubbard got red in the jowls and Jim expected him to say something sharp in return, but the cowman was silent.

The meeting had already started. Marshal was talking, spitting tobacco-juice into the spittoon as he talked.

He had trailed four head of cattle to the Strip, then lost them there.

"We oughta ride that strip," a man said.

"We've done that four times, "Marshall stated flatly. "We've all banded together and rode that Strip but hell, how can a man cover so many square miles of territory? With them dunes almost like mountains. there could be a thousan' places where rustlers could be hid. We just couldn't ride every inch of it."

Hubbard was listening closely, Jim noticed.

The meeting went on. Britton hobbled to the front of the room, coughed into his bandanna, and held up his right hand. The whispering stopped.

Britton said, "I'd like a word from Ike Hubbard."

Eyes swiveled to the cowman who got to his feet. Somebody whispered hoarsely, "The damn' cowthief," and Hubbard stopped, looking for the voice. He didn't find it. He stood at the head of the room beside the desk.

He talked at a slow voice, explaining that he had also lost cattle, and that he was not stealing their cattle.

"Somebody's runnin' em off," Henderson stated bluntly.

"But it's not me doin' it, Hubbard reiterated.

Jim saw that some of the farmers were believing the cowman. Was there a gang back in the hills, or on the Strip, that was stealing their stock? Henderson voiced that question.

Talk ran back and forth and the meeting finally broke up. Nothing certain had been decided on, Jim noticed, and decided this was just like many other meetings he'd attended—lot of smoke but no fire. Stewart had not showed up. Jim went outside.

THE MOON had risen and lay clear on the snow. The wind was down completely. The air was icy cold. He got his stirrup and rode toward the Circle W at a long trot. At Willow Creek he saw a rider going across the prairie to the west.

"Whitey, huh?"

The man was heading for the Hubbard ranch. Jim wondered what he was doing this hour of the night on nester range and then remembered that Hubbard had said maybe he'd got caught close to a linecamp. Whitey might've waited for the storm to stop before heading for his home bunkhouse.

There was a light in Stewart's house so Jim turned in. Stewart was drinking hot coffee and he offered Jim a cup. The heat of the liquid warmed him.

"Just got in about a half hour ago," Stewart said. "What was decided at the meeting?"

"Nothing, just talk." Jim told him about Hubbard being at the meeting and the cowman scowled.

"Just tryin' to whitewash hisself, Jim."

Jim looked around the small cabin and rubbed his hands together. "Guess I'll have to drift." Stewart said he could use the spare bunk for the night but Jim declined; he wanted to get to the Circle W. Midnight found him riding into the Circle W where he unsaddled and kept his bronc in the barn where the animal would have shelter and plenty of bluejoint hay.

Orville had just rolled into his bunk.

Jim said, "Up late."

"Poker game. Down in Muletail town."

Jim laid awake for some time. He knew, now, that Hubbard was out of suspicion—or was he? The sand Strip held the secret. Wind would whip across it and obliterate tracks and it would keep its secret safe.

Finally sleep claimed him.

He slept until nine and got up and went to the house. Tom was up and at the table. Orville had ridden out an hour before, Colleen had said. Jim asked where he had gone and the girl looked at him quickly.

"You're worried." He spoke softly.

She bit her bottom lip. She was a pretty picture. "Yes, I guess I am. There'll be trouble here soon, I suppose, and there'll be gunsmoke—"

Mabel was silent. So was Tom. Jim

finished his hotcakes and went to the bunkhouse. The two punchers were snowbound and were patching gear—sewing on harnesses and saddles, oiling their kaks. Jim talked with them for a while and around noon he rode to the Stewart ranch.

Stewart showed him two big bins of wheat he had built back in the hill behind the house, hewing out the sod and making a regular cave. He'd have wheat to haul for a year, anyway, he said. Jim let the grains trickle through his fingers. He almost came to asking the man why he bothered to raise wheat—by the time it got to the Chicago or Minneapolis market it was almost worthless, considering the high freight rates that had to be paid on it.

But he held his tongue. He ate with Stewart and found out he was going to haul another load of wheat across the Strip tomorrow. He got his horse and swung wide and went to the Slash Eight ranch, where Hubbard invited him inside.

Jim laid his cards on the table. "Just who do you figure is runnin' off these cows, Hubbard? Spread out your hand."

Hubbard shook his head.

"Do you suspect anybody?"

"I do."

"Who is it, or them?"

Hubbard shrugged. "I'll let you know." He added, "When the time comes."

Jim assured, "I'll know by then. Keep it to yourself," and he went outside. Whitey came out of the barn and looked sharply at him as he rode by. The gunman went into the house.

Jim wondered what part the gunman played in this, if any. He remembered seeing Whitey the night before on Willow Creek. Incidents were beginning to tie up in his mind, and the matter was taking form. But still, he was just playing a hunch, that was all.

That night he and Tom and Mabel and Colleen played rummy until midnight. The warm congeniality of the family-group made a strong impression on him. He told Tom he was going to sell his store and run the ranch with him and Mabel and Tom

(Continued On Page 78)

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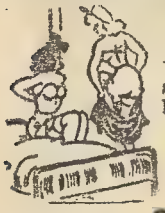

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(Continued From Page 77)

were smiling at this news. He glanced at Colleen.

She was frowning, and he wondered why.

NEXT MORNING, from a high butte, he watched Stewart's house. The man hooked a team to the wagon and drove to a pit in the side-hill and loaded wheat into the wagon, his scoop-shovel lifting the golden grains into the air and dumping them in the bed. He went into the house, came out with a rifle, and got on the seat, bundled to his ears in a big bearskin coat.

He swung the team around and went down a coulee. He had transferred the wagon-box to a low bobsled. Evidently he figured there would be enough snow on the Strip for sled-work. Jim knew that, if there were some bare spots, the ground would be frozen icy; therefore the sled would slide easy enough.

He left his bronc with reins tied around the saddlehorn. He went over a ridge and came to the coulee and waited. The horse would return to the Circle W. Finally Stewart came driving along.

Jim waited until he was past his hiding place, then he ran and climbed over the wagon's end-gate, and into the load of wheat.

Stewart did not see him. The rancher had a big tarp over the wheat to keep any snow off it and Jim climbed under this, digging himself into the wheat to keep warm. The bobsled lurched over the rough bumps and then rode smoothly on the flats.

Outside the wind pulled at the edges of the tarp, and now he heard the runners grate now and then on sand. They were on the Strip. The going was slower, and an hour went by. Now and then Stewart talked to his team, but for the most part he was silent.

Jim wondered what direction they were going. The rig had turned and twisted so much on the trail he had lost his sense of direction. He was getting cold, too. He had his .45 in his right hand.

He thought, "Well, this may be a wild hunch...but I don't think so,"

(Continued On Page 80)

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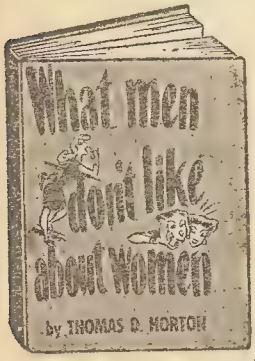

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FAMOUS WESTERN

(Continued From Page 78)

and waited. Time moved slowly by. Finally the bobsled stopped and a man said, "Well, you got here finally, huh?"

Stewart spoke. "Thought a bobsled would be better than a wagon, but I guess I mis-judged. You got everything ready to load?"

"All set. I'll load it while you go into the hole and get warmed up. Send the other gent out to help me."

Jim heard Stewart leave the seat. The springs squeaked, settled back. Somebody was untying the tarp at the head of the wagon. Jim waited until the man had pulled the tarp back and then he sat up on the load, his gun ready.

A lantern hung from a ridge-pole and Jim saw they were in a cave. There was no wind and he saw Whitey pulling on the tarp. Whitey saw him and said, "Jim Matts!" and jerked harder on the tarp.

The canvas was still around Jim's shoulders. The hard tug pulled him back a little, almost up-ending him on the wheat, and Whitey pulled his gun. He was fast and in his speed lay his destruction. For he shot too hurriedly and his lead went wild. Jim dropped him in his tracks.

The team was scared and wanted to rear. They couldn't run because they were smack-dab against an earth wall.

Jim said, "Easy boys," and hit the dirt standing-up. The echoes of the shooting were loud in his ears. He grabbed Whitey's gun but the precaution was needless. For the man was dead. Jim got to his feet, heart beating hard.

The setup was running together now, the strings tying themselves. Whitey had been in on it, too. The wall behind him was lined with gallon cans and he lifted one; it was heavy. Somewhere a man was calling and Jim recognized his voice.

He thought, "My Lord, is he in on this, too."

HE MOVED TO the entrance of the cave, a slot wide enough to drive a team through. There in the dusk he flattened against the wall and

a man came running. Jim slugged him across the head and dropped him. He had dropped three men on this range, slugging each of them, and that thought held a wry bitterness.

The man was down, cold, lying on his belly. Jim did not stop to turn him over and look at his face; he knew his identity. His voice had told him that. He went ahead and came out into the open air. An open spot lay ahead and about forty feet beyond that was a small cabin with a light in it.

The light went out suddenly.

Jim hunkered, waited. He had his gun up and he was ice inside. He caught the vagrant smell of cow manure but he didn't hear or see any cattle. The horses behind him had quieted down and the man he'd slugged lay prone.

He said, "Come on out, Stewart."

"Who's there?"

"Jim Matts?"

"How'd you get out here?"

"I rode out with you. I got under the tarp on your grain wagon. The game has run out, fellow. Better give yourself up."

A rifle bullet hit Jim along the fleshy part of his right leg. He almost went down, but he caught himself on one hand, and got back on his knees. Blood was running down his ankle and he cursed, quietly and meaningly.

The rifle spoke again, the bullet whining. Stewart was shooting out of a window, he saw. Jim wished he had a rifle instead of a sixshooter. He crept ahead, holding to the shadows, and Stewart saw him. The rifle ball kicked sand against Jim's face.

The bullet had landed five feet ahead of him. That told him that Stewart didn't have his range. But he was on a tough spot. Whitey was dead; he held no danger. But the gent he'd slugged might come to—

He had to get this over with, fast.

His leg hurt but it didn't throb as much. He didn't have time to try to stop the bleeding. If he went back, Stewart would see him leave the shadows; he could only go ahead.

He bunched his muscles and

(Continued On Page 82)

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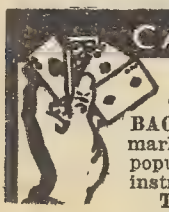

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FAMOUS WESTERN

(Continued From Page 81)

jumped, running toward the cabin. He had a chance if he got close to the cabin and crouched against the wall. The rifle spoke again and again the darkness made Stewart miss. Jim caught the sight of the muzzle-flame and knew then what window Stewart was shooting from. He shot twice and then he was against the cabin. He crouched, breathing heavily; he waited.

Stewart could not shoot at him now unless the rancher came out into the open. He could not see him from the window as he hunkered along the base of the cabin. Jim mentally cursed the blood in his boot. He listened.

Back in the cave opposite him, he heard a horse snort and paw. That would be one of the broncs hooked to the grain-sled. Somewhere else, down the gully, a horse neighed; that would be a saddle-bronc, he figured. But he heard no noise from Stewart inside the cabin.

Had his bullets found the rancher? He'd fired directly into the window, although he'd been running when he shot. He waited five minutes. No sound. He wormed his way to the door. A length of two-by-four lay along the wall. He took it and rapped the plank door and it came open.

No shot came against the door. And surely Stewart, trigger-happy by suspense and waiting, would have shot, thinking he, Jim Matts, was entering.

Jim left the two-by-four to prop open the door. he went to a window and looked in the corner. Stewart lay on his side on the rough floor, seemingly asleep, with his rifle beyond the reach of his flung-out hand, the lever down and a new shell halfway into the barrel.

Jim walked into the house.

He rolled Stewart over, felt inside his shirt for a heart beat, and found none. One of his bullets had hit the man in the neck. Jim was shaky when he got to his feet. He'd been lucky, damned lucky. A chance shot, with him running—

He pulled off his boot, sat on the bunk, and ripped a dirty blanket in

(Continued On Page 84)

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(Continued From Page 82)

two, taking a strip off it. He tied his ankle with it and hobbled outside, barefooted on that foot. He crossed the strip and went into the cave where the team still stood and he found the lantern and lit it.

THE STUNNED man was sitting up.

Jim hunkered beside him. He said, "Orville, get your bronc and shade out pronto. I'll keep your sisters and Tom Shafer from knowing."

"How did you find this spot?"

Jim told him about riding out on the wheat. "With the evidence I've found here, you'd go to the pen—if the local ranchers and Hubbard didn't hang you first. You'd better drift."

Orville got to his feet. He said, "I guess you're right, Matts."

Jim said, "I know I'm right."

Orville said, "Thanks, fellow," and went down the coulee. Soon Jim heard a horse lope out, drifting south. The sounds died.

Jim hobbled back to the house and finally got on his boot. Stewart was dead and Whitey was dead and nobody would ever know but him and Orville. He thought of Colleen and her golden hair. Yes, it was best that Orville had pulled out.

He felt better now. He looked the place over and found out four caves had been carved back into the sand, the ceilings made of planks and propped with eight-by-eight timbers. One was a place to hold stolen cattle, another to butcher them, and the third and fourth to process and can the beef.

Four cows were in the one pen. Two wore the Hubbard Slash Eight, one the Circle W, and another bore Henderson's iron. Jim opened the heavy door and turned them down the canyon. Suddenly he heard horses somewhere in the night.

"Jim," a voice called in the darkness.

Tom Shafer....Now what was he doing out of bed? Jim called back. Soon five riders came into the light of the lantern hanging on a hook beside the house. Ike Hubbard was there and so was Mabel. One of the Circle W riders was along and Col-

leen rode a pretty pinto.

"Your horse came into camp alone," Tom Shafer explained. "We headed out and run into Ike here and he joined us. We cut your sign out by the Strip and rode in and Colleen heard guns talking, she claimed, and we headed this way."

"This is the spread," Jim said. He told them everything. Tom Shafer and Ike Hubbard and the Circle W man came down fast with Mabel leaving leather, too. Only Colleen sat in saddle and the lamplight showed her face to be a little drawn and pale.

"Whitey in on it. Why, that—" Ike Hubbard was sputtering.

The four went out to inspect the cow-thieving set-up. Only Colleen, still on her horse, remained with Jim.

"Just the two men in on this, Whitey and Stewart?" she asked.

Jim looked at her. "That butcher down in Wilmington is in on it. They got the canned beef to him and he sold it."

"Nobody else here when you came?"

Jim kept looking at her.

She was adamant. "Were you sure?"

Jim said, "Orville rode out. I gave him that choice. How did you know."

"I followed him once—to the Strip—I tracked him in. I found out. I've kept it hidden—kept it to myself—it seems like years." She caught her emotions. "That was two months ago."

"You could have told Tom?"

"Yes? And had his hair-trigger temper break and have gunplay in the family?"

Jim nodded, somber.

"What made you suspicious, Jim?"

Jim told her about seeing a gallon can in Stewart's cabin. He had thought at first the man had opened up but on closer inspection he'd noticed it had never been opened, that it'd never even been sealed with a lid. Then he remembered how Stewart had started out with a wagon-bin half-full of wheat and how it had been almost full when they'd met him coming into Wilmington.

"He had cans under that wheat. That wheat raising was all a blind."

She said, "Let's go home."

(Continued On Page 88)

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FAMOUS WESTERN

(Continued From Page 85)

They found a horse in the brush—evidently Whitey's for it wore a Slash Eight iron—and Jim got into saddle and they rode out, heading for the Circle W. Jim's leg had stopped bleeding and was without pain.

"You'll never tell, Jim?"

"Never." Jim added, "He'll go straight from now on, I hope."

"I hope so, too."

The moon was rising and showing the greasewood that dotted the sand of the Strip. Here and there lay small banks of snow and the wind had lost its fierce chill. Indian summer was coming.

Jim looked at Colleen. She smiled a little and he rode close and put his arm around her. After a while he said, "I'm staying in this country, Colleen. I'm selling my store in Cheyenne."

"I'm glad," she said.

THE END

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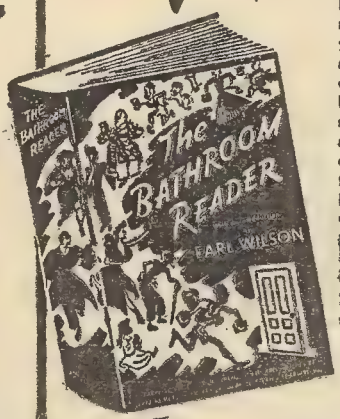

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The Law Wagon

By Judge Colt

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After months of careful tracking, Musgrove was in jail in Denver, and Ed Franklin, his right-hand man, imprisoned at Fort Saunders. Musgrove was awaiting trial in January, two months away, and seemed to take the whole matter pretty lightly. He made

no pretense of believing that his gang would let him stay in jail till trial time, but waited, without any apparent impatience, for someone to make a jail break and get him out.

As for Franklin, he was desperately ill from loss of blood during his desperate last stand, or so the authorities at the Fort thought . . . until they woke one day to find him gone. The guard had been less cautious than he might have been, in the belief that the "sick" man was barely able to move.

There was little doubt about Franklin's destination. For weeks, members of the Musgrove band had been gathering in Denver. The law officers there knew that a prison break was brewing, but there was nothing they could do. The best-known criminals cannot be arrested as long as they behave themselves, and Musgrove's boys might have been in the best Sunday School set, the way they were acting. Denver officials looked on impotently, while the forces gathered. When the news of Ed Franklin's departure from his enforced sickbed at Fort Saunders came through, Cook and his men became even more worried. Still, there was nothing to do but stay alert and wait for trouble.

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(Continued On Page 90)

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FAMOUS WESTERN

(Continued From Page 89)

AS THE news leaked out of the law headquarters, the town rose to a fever pitch of excitement and anger. The feeling had been growing for some time anyhow, while the outlaws poured in from all over. Everybody knew there was going to be some sort of attempt to free Musgrove, and everyone was determined not to let him get away.

Things got too hot for Duggan and Franklin. The holdup had occurred Friday evening. By Sunday morning, it was well known that the two of them had left town. Sheriffs in all the neighboring towns were notified to be on the lookout for them, and late Sunday afternoon, news came in from John Keith, the Sheriff at Golden, that a couple of men who seemed to fit the description had been drinking there since the evening before. The final identification had been made when one of them cashed a torn twenty, mended as the Judge had informed the police a bill of his was mended.

A posse left Denver immediately, and made the eighteen miles to Golden by nine o'clock that night. They arrived to discover that Franklin had drunk himself out of the picture. He was at the local hotel, fast asleep. Duggan was still going strong, however. He was at Dan Hill's saloon, having his last few before the place closed up for the night.

By the time the posse reached the saloon, the lights were already out. The place was closed, but Duggan, who had seen the horsemen coming, had gone back with Miles Hill, the saloonkeeper's brother, to get his gun.

The posse of lawmen surrounded the two men in a back room of the bar. Duggan opened fire from inside. The outlaws had a small advantage, in that the lawmen were more clearly visible. One of them was downed by return fire, but the other was seen to dash off into the darkness.

To the general dismay of the posse, they discovered soon enough that the man who'd gone down was not Duggan, but Hill, who'd been dragged into the thing as a comparatively innocent bystander. After a brief attempt to track Duggan through the thick brush

(Continued On Page 92)

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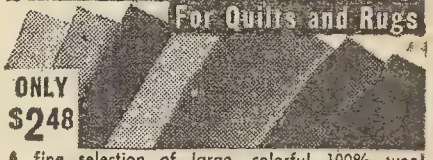

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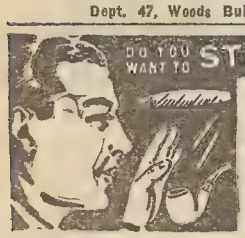

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(Continued From Page 90)

in the dark, they gave up and decided at least to secure Franklin.

They found Musgrove's erstwhile aide asleep in the bed in his hotel room. But outlaws sleep, even drunk, with one ear open. Franklin awoke fully alert, and gave three men a bad time for several minutes. After some leaping about, over the bed, and around the room, the desperado managed to get his hands on his gun. He had barely lifted it to take aim, when a bullet from Cook's gun got him through the heart.

There was still Duggan to find, and for a while it looked as if that was going to be the least of their troubles. When the three lawmen came down the hotel stairs, they found the town, aroused by the shots, in an uproar. Miles Hill's body demanded explanation. The Hill brothers were friends and neighbors to the people of Golden, and there were ugly looks for the invading posse, and murmurs of trouble.

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(Continued On Page 94)

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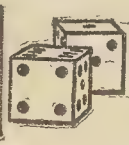

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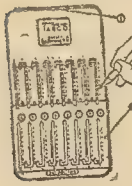

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FAMOUS WESTERN

(Continued From Page 92)

felt much as they did. The prisoner was released without difficulty, and escorted by the town's leading citizens to a bridge over Cherry Creek, where the city's executions had taken place in pre-law days.

Probably the wierdest touch of all was that the crowd paused in front of the jail, to take a solemn vote on the matter of the hanging. After duly voting to dispose of their man, they marched him away.

Whether Musgrove hoped till the last minute for help from his friends (who had already, not unwisely, left town), or whether he was simply resigned to his fate, nobody knows. He made no attempt at any time to get away. He stood quietly while the preparations were being made, wrote a couple of farewell letters, one to his wife and one to his brother while they were tying his legs, and made no comment at any time, except when he was told to make his preparations for death. His answer than was an abrupt, "Go on with your work," to the hangman.

The condemned man smoked a cigarette calmly while the wagon on which he stood was being prepared for the final movement out from under, and while the noose was placed around his neck. As the whip decended on the horse, the prisoner flicked away his cigarette, and leaped high into the air. When he came down again, the wagon was gone, and he succeeded in his purpose: His neck broke on the first sharp jerk, and he saved the agony of death by strangulation.

The crowd dispersed, but strangely enough, it was in a more violent mood when it broke up than it had been when it gathered. The city stayed in a state of suspended lynch-mood, until, three days later, word was received that Duggan had been captured.

Cook was determined to bring in this last of the band and save him for a fair trial. The people of Denver were otherwise determined. They were prepared for Duggan's arrival, but for the time being, at least, Cook managed to cheat them of their victim by persuading the stage coach to run ahead of schedule. He arrived

with his prisoner a full twelve hours before they were expected, and managed to get him into jail, although they were recognized going through the streets, and such a large crowd was gathered by the time they made it to prison that Cook had to hold his guns on the mob at the end to achieve his purpose.

With Duggan safely incarcerated, the crowds swelled and ebbed in front of the jail all day. But with Cook back in town, the guards were a good deal more alert, or more courageous, than they had been when the people came after Musgrove. By evening, every one had gone home, and Cook decided to move Duggan overnight, quietly, to another jail, in case things started up again the next day.

He made his plans secretly, and got Duggan safely into the wagon. Everything seemed to be all right.. until they got to the bridge over Cherry Creek where Musgrove had flicked his last cigarette ash. Then the wagon was suddenly surrounded by a mob that had somehow got word of the plan, and the terrified prisoner, displaying none of his leader's fortitude, was hustled over to a convenient cottonwood, and the last of the Musgrove band was finished.

THE END

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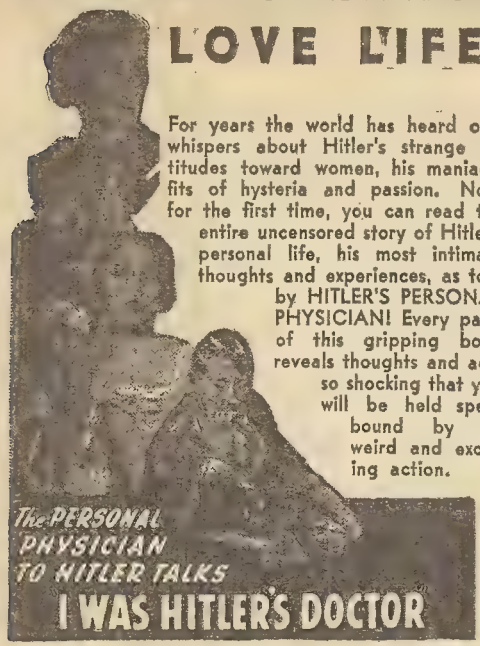

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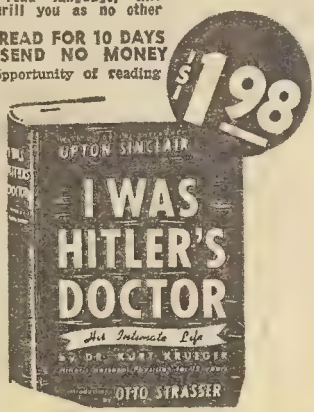

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DIGGER JOHN'S TRICK

(Continued From Page 53)

I trained them burros to wear snowshoes and needed a good powder snow before I could lead out an' expect the Houns to bring out their mules. It'll take them days to git them mules outa thet mess an' by thet time we'll have this ore out to Auburn an' in charge of the Wells Fargo Company. The Wells men will take it into the smelter and that'll make everythin' hunkydory fer yore father. Thet'll teach city slickers to make their livin' slicking city-folks an' leave the pore hill-billy miners alone!"

THE END

ANSWERS TO WILD WEST QUIZ

1. An empty whiskey bottle
2. Horse stealing
3. Whiskey
4. Guarding a stagecoach
5. Bucks
6. The hooded saddle stirrups
7. Shoot him and roll him into the Pecos
8. His extra clothes
9. Dawn
10. Comanches

THE END .....

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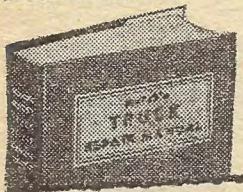

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